DEATH O DEATH

HORROR COLLECTION VOL 2

ELLIE DOUGLAS

Death O Death
Anthology
By
Ellie Douglas

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Disclaimer.

All of the stories within this anthology are to entertain you. The individual stories are set in different locations.

Also some of the following stories will become full novels. Feel free to email me author1ellie@gmail.com with the one you'd like to see as a full novel.

Enjoy the short stories. As an added bonus there is two micro flash fiction stories in this anthology.

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Why aren’t you scared?

One of many

“Are you sure you don’t want me to give you a lift home?” Mandy asked Rebecca while fumbling for her car keys.

“That bottomless purse of yours will be the death of you one day. And yes, I’m sure. I only live a few blocks down the damn road. I can walk it. I want to walk it,” Rebecca cooed softly.

“Okay, I’ll see you at school tomorrow.”

“Don’t remind me, there is nothing more exciting than university.”

“Your sarcasm is on fire tonight.’ Mandy said, as she waved her car keys in the air in a show of a ‘triumphant, I-found-them way.

“See ya, Becs.” Mandy slipped into the seat of her car.

Rebecca waved goodbye. The night was unusually busy with more cars as she travelled down the partially lit street. Her mind was fixated on Ryker. His milky white skin accented by his dark blonde hair. His pearl shaped pale blue eyes and rosy lips. She felt a pang in her stomach as she reminisced a chorus of erotic interludes. She couldn’t believe they’d only been on eight dates. She was hooked from the very moment she set eyes on him. A smile grew on her tiny face, and her eyes lit up when a blue commodore pulled alongside her.

Ryker called out from the driver’s window. “Get in babe.”

Rebecca eagerly crawled into the passenger side, leaned over and planted a kiss on Ryker’s cheek.

“I didn’t think you were gonna get away from Mandy. Happy to see you did.”

“You were watching?”

“No, Mandy wasn’t with you, so I put two and two together.”

“Oh, well she almost was. She kept on insisting on driving me home. I had to do a bit of persuading, but I always win.” She placed her hand on his thigh. “You should know that about me, Smartass!”

Ryker smiled, as he shifted in his seat and pulled the car out. His eyes left the road to steal a glance at Rebecca. He instantly smiled. Her skirt had slightly risen above her knees exposing her tanned and well-toned thighs. Ryker licked his lips and turned his eyes back toward the road.

“Where are we going tonight?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Come on! I hate surprises.” Rebecca gruffed as she gently pinched Ryker’s thigh. He gave off a slight moan that caused Rebecca to squirm.

“You’ll love this surprise.”

“Why are you groaning?” She asked while squeezing his thigh a little higher.

“I’m not groaning. I’m excited.”

“About what?” She tried her best to act dumb.

Ryker let his eyes meet her dark brown orbs. He searched Rebecca’s face.. She was trying to stifle laughter. With a forced breath it sounded like a pig’s snort. She was such a tease. Ryker quickly glanced back toward the road and laughed at her effort to contain her amusement at his expense.

“You love playing the dumb-chick don’t you?”

“Yes... yes I do. Especially with you. I know it makes you wonder if I’m serious or not. I find it amusing. It makes me giggle. .”

“You won’t be giggling for much longer!” He said while removing her hand almost roughly off of his thigh. He gave her a quick look, enough to see her fold her hands across her lap and pout.

“You really don’t play the cold and cynical type well. I know better.”

Ryker didn’t answer, instead he concentrated on the road ahead. He didn’t have to look at his prize to know she still sat securely in the seat beside him. He attempted small talk with his trophy, but his mind was fixated on the event he had planned. The small talk did as he intended however, giving the illusion time. He checked the rearview mirror, and with no cars in sight he turned into a dirt driveway. He had already ensured long ago that there were no CCTV camera’s in the area leading up to the road. There were no street lights and the driveway was lined with a white twelve-foot concrete wall that acted like a giant fortress.

Rebecca cast her eyes on the digital clock on the dash and compared it to her gold wrist watch.

“What the hell, we’ve been on the road for an hour?” She shook her head. “It sure didn’t feel like that long. Where on earth are you taking me?”

Rebecca looked out the window to her right and could only see the concrete wall. She looked ahead as the headlights from the car shone the way. She couldn’t see anything until before her appeared an abandoned old mansion.

“Well, that looks spooky.” she said in a huff.

“Well the outside is pretty gross, but the inside is like a true mansion. Just wait until you see what I have set up for us. You are going to love it.” He lightly brushed the side of her cheek. The tingling sensation across her face made her think twice about biting his head off. She decided to withhold her objections until she saw what he had to offer.

“We’re here,” he proudly announced.

Rebecca held back the sarcasm and got out of the car. She stood in front of the red, run-down brick building, and screwed up her face into one of bewilderment. “It doesn’t look very inviting. I don’t think I want to go in. I don’t feel comfortable.”

“Don’t be so scared. Come on,” Ryker coaxed. He grabbed her hand and gently pulled her toward the wooden door.

It had seen better days. It was chipped and had scuffs and stains. Some of the stains made her think of old blood. The hair on her arms rose as she began to panic. She gripped Ryker’s hand tighter.

“You are scared, aren’t you?”

“Well, you have to admit it’s creepy. It’s like one of those ghost mansions from some horror movie. Why are we here?”

“You’ll see... Come on.” He pulled her into him wrapping his arm around her shoulder. When he opened the door, Rebecca pulled back and put her hand over her mouth.

“I forgot to mention it is a little dusty.”

“A little.” Rebecca said between coughs. “Who owns this place?”

Ryker eased her inside. In the foyer she could see a long corridor with multiple doors. The carpet was so well worn it barely held together. The floor creaked with each footfall.

“I inherited it a long time ago.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“It’s obviously not been lived in for years.” She ran her hand over the edge of a picture frame on the wall. Her fingers came back coated in years of dust. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Just be patient.”

“Why won’t you answer me?”

“I will. I promise. I just want it to be a surprise. Please... come... I have something waiting for you in the master bedroom.”

Rebecca said no more and followed Ryker down the long corridor. It was wide enough to allow them to walk side by side. He held onto her hand. The walls were covered with yellowing paintings. Something terrified her about all of the people in the paintings. Every single one was of a woman, and all in varying states of fear. Yet they had an artistic nuance about them. They weren't gruesome or macabre, but the eyes on those women's faces bore through Rebecca. Leaving her feeling weak and vulnerable.

"Who are those women in the paintings?"

"My ancestors."

"They look... petrified?"

When Ryker did not respond, Rebecca breathed deep and said no more. At the end of the hallway was a brown door, far darker than all the others. As soon as Ryker opened it, Rebecca let out a scream and tried to run.

"I don't know what the fuck kind of joke this is, but it isn't funny!"

"Oh! It is no joke... *Bitch!* Come back here!" Ryker grabbed Rebecca roughly and pushed her through the door.

She stumbled and fell forward. Unable to catch herself, she hit her temple on a table and immediately she could feel the warmth of her own blood as it trickled down the side of her face. Her body shook in fear and her teeth began to chatter as if she stood in the cold artic wind.

Suddenly, she could feel the weight of Ryker as he pinned her down, straddling her lower back and holding her arms behind her. He sat there squeezing her arms tighter together until her shoulders burned and the feeling of dislocation was speedily building.

"Get the fuck off me," She breathed in a barely audible voice.

"Oh, is someone a little scared?" he taunted.

"Why are you doing this? Get off me!" She squirmed under his weight but couldn't throw him off.

Unexpectedly, and so forcefully quick, Ryker flipped her over onto her back. Then as he stood he yanked her to her feet. She stumbled unsteadily, and a wave of vertigo threatened but quickly passed. She looked around the room. Her eyes darting in every direction. Her expression of building terror excited Ryker. He watched her as she took in the entire room. Her dark brown eyes filled with tears as she spied the chains on the wall, a dirty cobwebbed table to the left of the chains. He could almost hear her heart thump when she caught sight of what was on the table. A long hunters'

knife, a set of different sized saws, a hammer, an ice pick, a pair of pliers and rope. She jumped as Ryker dragged her toward the very table.

"Please... No..." she pleaded. "Please don't... Just let me go. I promise I won't tell anyone about this. Please..."

"No use begging. Not yet at least. I haven't even started." He burst into a laugh that was as dark and foreboding as the torture room itself.

Rebecca tried to anchor herself, but he was so much stronger. Inordinately strong. She dug her fingernails into his wrists drawing blood, but that didn't even delay him. She pushed her high heels hard into the wooden floor, yet he still managed to pull her toward the chains that hung from the ceiling. The sound of her heels scrapping along the wooded floor caused her teeth to ache.

"Stop! Fucking Stop!" she screamed.

"That's right, scream. I love listening to the fear. Scream for me, you stupid little bitch. Scream!"

Rebecca's mind filled with what now became clearer. The red flags Mandy told her about. Those warning signs all becoming very evident. When Mandy told her to stay away from him, she didn't listen and was regretting it more than anything. All she could hear in her head now was Mandy telling her over and over. '*He's a man whore. He goes through women like dirty knickers. Don't go out with him Rebecca. Don't!'* Instead she went out multiple times and kept it hidden from Mandy, not wanting the backlash and told-you-sos.

"Mandy was right about you. You are a creep. Dirty sick perverted creep." She scratched him deeply across the arm.

Ryker laughed harder and more maniac than human.

"You are such a twisted fuck! Is this what you get off on? Chaining women up and raping them?" She struggled as his grip tightened on her wrists.

"I am not going to touch you in that way. The sex was a ploy. I wanted you to trust me. This... oh baby this is not sexual. You are a used up slut. It isn't your cunt I want."

"Then what do you want?"

"Your skin..." he grinned menacing. "Your eyes..." he released one of her hands and caressed her lips. "Your lips..." When she slapped him, he secured her hands again and went on as though she hadn't even touched

him. “Your insides to be worn on the outside.” Ryker licked his lips sardonically.

Rebecca gasped. His tone of voice was so scary she almost vomited. She jolted at his firm grip as he raised her left arm above her head and secured the shackle to her wrist. Then he did the same with her right. She kicked out nearly landing her right heel in his groin. Unfortunately for her, he was an experienced abductor. He was just out of reach.

“You bastard. Let me go!”

Ryker didn’t answer instead he slapped her unexpectedly hard across her face, leaving a bright red swelling impression. Tears streamed from her dark eyes and collected at her mouth.

“What are you going to do? Please don’t hurt me. I’ll do anything you want. God... Please... Please...” Her voice rose to a higher octave with each plea. “Ryker Please!”

Ryker ignored her as he spread her legs wide apart and secured them with an ankle attachment that was bolted to the floor.

“Please, God! Please stop...”

He viciously tore her blouse off in one hard fast movement. Her buttons shot into the air and landed in a spin on the floor a few feet away. He tossed the torn blouse to the floor behind him and ripped off her skirt. Taking the hunters knife he slid it into the waist band across the hips of her knickers and jerked upwards slicing the thin material like a blade cutting a feather. Once he’d done the other side, her knickers dropped to the floor like a discarded trash bag. He did the same to her bra. Now fully exposed she felt the cold steal of the blade as he teasingly drew it in circles around her left nipple.

“Don’t do that. Please for fucks sake don’t!!!”

Ryker’s eyes meet with her tearful brown eyes. His were monstrous and glared so intense and psychotic that she knew that instant she was going to die. Her adrenaline shot through her like a speeding bullet. Her body shook, her pupils enlarged, and her mouth opened into a scream as he swiftly cut off her nipple. She watched Ryker tilt his head and close his eyes, twirling her bloodied nipple between his thumb and finger as if he were playing some musical instrument. The way he swayed softly; to her, he appeared to be listening to an orchestra of divinity that all seemed way too surreal.

Rebecca’s body jolted stiffly around, thrusting about like a shark out of water. The restraints grew tighter and hurt, leaving her no option but to

reduce her struggling. The searing pain from her sliced up breast felt like a horse's kick to the chest. She'd felt nothing like it before. Through gritted teeth she spat saliva and cursed Ryker.

"Yes, now scream for me." Without opening his eyes, he spoke calmly to her. His demands to have her scream enunciated out of his mouth like a chilling blast of wind. He opened his eyes and threw the bloodied nipple onto the cobwebbed table. A flash of light kept blinking. Rebecca looked toward the center of the room directly behind Ryker. She could see the camera.

"You sick bastard! You're taking pictures of me?" She seethed and spat while praying for a miracle.

"Of course, my wall needs new blood and your it!" He stormed.

He swiftly removed her other nipple. It was so fast and effortless that he didn't skip a beat. But she did. Rebecca's body protested, she squirmed around like an angry snake. Doing exactly what he wanted, what he needed. She screamed bloody murder.

For the next hour she screamed until her voice was a mere croak. He sliced her stomach with three inch deep wounds, cut off her clitoris and carved his name into the top of her right thigh. On her left thigh he carved a smiley face before cutting deep enough to pull out a vein, which he wrapped around his finger and pulled. Like a game of tug-o-war he pulled hard, but purposefully slow. Rebecca could feel it being torn from the very tendon and muscle that it was attached to. Her insides burned, and she longed for death. He'd removed her fingers, one by one, and her toes. He then moved to her teeth, using the pliers he pulled several out. He got bitten once but he didn't care. If she bit him again, he'd have used the hammer across her head. Still with the bloody pliers he began on her right eye. Her shrilling screams almost made him orgasm.

He pushed the pliers in at the waterline of her right eye. Her eyeball puffed forward a little as he penetrated further in before tilting the head of the pliers upward so it was behind her eyeball. He could feel the resistance from the tough veins and tendons. He used a little more force, but still he was careful enough to remove her eye without damaging it. Rebecca's body convulsed like she was being electrocuted. She couldn't stand the pain any longer and passed out. The last thought that went through her head was of her eye being removed. Her now inert body angered Ryker. He did

everything he could think of to wake her. Each time she opened her one eye she'd shiver violently and pass back out again.

He was livid. He was feeding off her screams, her begging. An unresponsive body was not to his liking. He picked up the larger bone saw and started sawing her body in half from her head down. Cutting through the bone was easy, blood vomited out the sides like an over spilling dam. He continued down her face watching her head split and fall to the sides opening up like a new born flower. Down her throat, cutting through her spinal cord and through her chest bone down her torso. He paused to watch her body split apart like the dead sea offering him more space to continue. He would pause just long enough for more photos to be taken. He looked at his subject as art, the way her left side had folded downward into a wilt of a dead banana leaf. It amused him, and he continued.

Ryker carried on sawing at her body. The bone saw cut effortlessly through the middle of her body all the way until her entire body was now in two precise halves. Her right side fell first splattering up into the air the half-spilled organs and blood. Her left side seemed to sway a little then tilted and collapsed as if in slow motion. To him, the stream of blood flushing from Rebecca's lifeless body was like the very beacon as clear and true as a lighthouse on a cloudless day. Everything shone as bright and fluorescent as a florid shower of gore.

He stood there admiring his handiwork and a rush came over him, filling every nerve cell like miniature electric shocks. The rush mixed with anger at his victim's earlier than expected demise. He carefully removed the organs that had spilled out and put them into jars that he had waiting. Half a heart and half a lung were put back together in the jars and half her brain was put with the other half. He sat the jars atop a high shelf in the room next to many other jars all filled with different woman's body parts.

He picked up her remains and dumped them into a barrel filled with acid. Once her body was dissolved, there would be no trace of what he had done except for the trophies in his jars. Just as his murdering alcoholic father had taught him. Ryker casually remembers when his father had him take a razor to his mothers throat. How powerful he felt afterwards, toughening him up enough to then dismember his violent father with the garden shovel. He stood there reflecting over his past with an evil smile. "Bastards." He shouted as he left the mansion on his next quest.

Six Months later: Time for another

On May the 31st the final days of spring ended, and the morning birthed a sun so bright it would take your breath away. Lucy squinted at the brightness as she opened the drapes that morning. Her mind catapulted her into a distant memory, one she felt she had long forgotten. She watched herself as a young infant in the middle of a semi-furnished living room, still at crawling stage and with a sock shoved in her mouth like a ball-gag. Lucy quickly blinked and shook the memory away. Not wanting to remember her past, she brimmed a happy smile and turned on her music. Listening to the sounds of Willy William made her swing her slender hips and sing aloud as she made her morning cup of coffee.

An hour later she was ready for work and started out. She always walked to and from work and was walking to the beat of her iPod swinging her arms in motion to the music of Shania Twain. At work she removed her earplugs, tucked them with her iPod into her purse and stored it in the back room. Lucy greeted Angela and Steve. She got right to work clearing the early bird tables before the next rush came in.

"Good night?" Angela handed Lucy a cleaning rag.

"The usual, how about you?"

"I got some last night so I'm super upbeat, I thought you might have got some too by the way you are smiling." Angela giggled and walked toward the counter for some napkins to put into the holders.

"One doesn't always need that to make them smile. I smile all the time."

Angela walked around filling the napkins up, then added, "I've noticed"

"Do you think that hot guy is gonna show up today? You know the one that has been here for the last month like clockwork at 1:00 pm on the dot. He sure fancy's you. How come you haven't gone out with him yet?"

"Maybe he'll show. He is cute... I'll give him that. He hasn't asked me out. Not directly. I don't just go out with someone because they look like a superstar." Lucy finished wiping the last of the tables and dried her hands across her apron which sat snuggly from her hips and ended just beneath her bottom.

“You said you got some, I assume with Jacob? If so, then why are you concerned if hotness comes in or not?”

“Oh my God, Lucy are you kidding? Who wouldn’t want to look at him all day.” She stepped closer and leaned into Lucy’s ear. “Truth is I pretended I was fucking him when I was with Jacob.”

Angela giggled and stepped back from Lucy. She walked to the counter where she filled the coffee machine with fresh new beans.

“Well, that’s unfair to Jacob don’t you think?”

“I’m sure he fantasizes about his dream girl while bonking my brains out. I can see it in his face. Besides this is the 20th century, it isn’t like the 1500s or something. I didn’t think you were so prudish.”

“I’m not. It’s not that. It’s just... I dunno... if I were with one guy I’d be thinking of him and not someone else. Maybe I am moralistic or something? Whatever I am, I’m me.” Lucy said as she continued to beam brightly. She now stood behind the counter and served the first customer that wandered in aimlessly, like some morning zombie longing for his fresh brew of coffee.

A few hours passed, and it was getting close to 1:00 pm. Lucy watched Angela check her phone repeatedly right up until the door swung wide at 1:00 sharp, and handsome walked straight up to the counter flashing his million-dollar smile. His blonde hair moved in motion with his swagger.

Angela was right there, like magic she’d traveled from the kitchen area to the front of the counter in mere seconds. Lucy found it amusing to watch. One thing she noticed was that he never seemed keen on Angela, he always made eye contact with her instead. Lucy casually walked toward the front counter with a tea towel hung over her left shoulder, her hands working the end of it to dry them. Hotness watched her every stride, Angela noticed this and sighed.

“The usual?”

“Actually no, today I’d like a mocha with extra cinnamon.” He said overtly polite.

Lucy noticed how much his voice sounded like the prelude of a flute before its elegance was overrun by a thumping sharp sound that reminded her of a severe storm brewing. A mixture she’d noticed before, more perceptible this time. Even his pale blue eyes seemed distant, foreboding, predicting a silent war he concocted. She’d seen that look in her mother’s eyes many times.

Ryker took his seat, a booth in the back, out of sight from other customers. Lucy made his mocha and took it to him. As she started to set it on the table, he reached to grab it and took hold of her hand. She gave him a fleeting look, then put the cup down and withdrew her hand. She dipped her hand into her apron and pulled out her notebook and pen.

"Can I get you something else?"

"Yes, you can get yourself a drink and join me."

"I can't, I'm working. Maybe later." She said with a flatness to her voice.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were interested in me. Don't worry I won't bother you again. I misread the signals." Ryker said, looking at his cup, not making eye contact with Lucy.

"I wouldn't say I'm not interested. But I am working. I can join you after my shift if you like?"

Ryker slowly lifted his eyes from his cup to meet hers. He lingered a moment before saying anything. Lucy found his gaze penetrating, and briefly she reflected on the same look that her mother gave. He seemed alluring and mysterious. All other signs temporarily vanished. She found herself feeling more relaxed.

"What time are you knocking off?"

"3:00 pm."

"Great I'll pick you up then."

"Okay." Lucy said, as she turned and walked toward the counter with a smile larger than she'd had before. Her cheeks flushed giving her a warm feeling. Something about him was both puzzling and dangerous she wasn't sure which, just yet.

At 3:00 pm, on the dot, Ryker returned and escorted Lucy to his blue Commodore. On the fourth date he'd arranged to pick her up from her place and take her to the town's only nightclub. The disadvantage of living in a small town meant very few places to visit. The advantage of living there meant less cops to deal with, no FBI, and no forensic labs. Even if he had been seen on dates with all the women he'd abducted, his real home was clean, his alibi tight.

After the seventh date, Ryker believed he'd gained enough trust with Lucy to take her to the mansion. He drove out and set the room up. Drove back and picked up Lucy. She was wearing a low cut black top that hung

loosely over her matchstick jeans. He noticed her ballet flats and wondered why she was dressed so casually.

"You know we are going out to Lakewood, right?"

"Don't be such a worry wart. See this bag? In it is my gown and heels. I just wanted to be comfortable on the long drive."

"Smart." Ryker said unable to hide his disappointment.

"If it means that much to you I can change, but I warn you, I will be grumpy the entire drive."

Ryker thought for a moment and not wanting to set off any suspicious alarms he acted cool, calm and collected. He put his arm around her shoulder and brought her in for a hug.

"No, it's fine," he whispered seductively in her ear. He ran his tongue around her ear before pulling away and opening the car door for her.

Lucy placed her bag of clothing in the backseat and then settled into the passenger seat, giving Ryker a gracious smile.

"I love a man who knows not to piss a woman off." She snickered while putting her seatbelt on.

"You'll not love me for much longer." He thought as he closed the door.

"We have one stop to make. I promised my cousin I would drop off some books."

Lucy looked into the backseat, her eyes quickly investigating the car.

"They're in the trunk."

She felt a little stupid and said nothing. Instead, she leaned over and kissed Ryker on the cheek, lingering a little longer. When she pulled back, he stole a glance. He could see she was excited; both her nipples were standing tall and stiff. He reached over and gently brushed his arm purposely across her chest before placing his hand on her upper thigh. Hearing her soft gasp, he knew she was melting. He thought about pulling over for one last screw, but his insane mind urged him to drive straight to the mansion. He left his hand on her lap where she had put her hand across his. The tension between them was proving too much for Ryker. He removed his hand and put it on the steering wheel. Lucy let out a huff.

When the mansion came into sight, he noticed no fear in Lucy. It concerned and disappointed him a little.

"Do you like old looking creepy mansions?"

"I studied them in history. I've always been fascinated by them. Do you think your cousin would let me take a look around while you give him the

books?"

"Um, yeah, I think he'd be okay with that."

"Does he live here all by himself? It must be at least ten rooms. It looks huge."

"He does and there are 15 rooms in total." Ryker's voice had an edgy tone that was unfamiliar to her.

"You seem a little perturbed. I didn't mean to intrude. Are you sure your cousin won't mind me tagging along?"

"He won't mind. I'm not upset, I'm just a little surprised."

"Surprised? Why?"

"Because I always thought young ladies like yourself are freaked out by a mansion like this."

"That's a little presumptuous coming from you. Your twenty-seven, the same age as me, and you seriously think all women are frightened little ducks?"

"Well no, maybe a little." Ryker changed his tone and began to sound more like the man she'd gotten to know.

"That's better. Now let's go inside. I'm dying to see the interior."

Ryker pulled the car around and parked close to the front door. He watched Lucy closely as he shut off the car and removed the key. Her face showed no emotion as she studied the stains on the door. Instead, she jumped out of the car rushing to the door and ran her hand over the cuts, chipped paint and stains. Ryker got out of the car to follow her. He grabbed hold of Lucy's arm a little too roughly. Lucy could feel his fingers digging into her flesh.

"Hey... not so rough." She twisted her arm out of his grasp. "Come on open the door I want to go in."

Ryker was confused by Lucy's eagerness to get inside. He almost turned and ended it before things started, but he was compelled to follow through. The idea of wearing her skin intrigued him enough to open the door.

Lucy listened to the noise of the creaking door. The chilling sound like a dying animal, crying out in pain and sorrow with its last breath. She was beside herself with glee. She stood still, looking at the long corridor from floor to ceiling and back again.

Ryker led her in, though no leading was necessary. Lucy was in before he was. He shut the door and grabbed her arm briskly pulling her down the

corridor. She abruptly stopped to look at the many pictures. Her eyes took in every detail and a deathly smile erupted on her petite face.

"Do you like them?"

"I do. They remind me of stills from the wax museum. I'd love the artist's number. Do you think your cousin will have it still? Where is he by the way and where are the books?" Lucy stood firm, locked into place glaring at Ryker, searching his face for answers.

Ryker looked back toward the door on purpose, then his eyes met Lucy's.

"I forgot the damn books. My cousin said he may not be here and to leave them in the den for him."

"Well then, what are you waiting for. Go get them. I'll just take a look around. You said it was okay."

"Yes, I did, but let's not worry about the books right now. Let me show you the master bedroom, I think you'll love it."

"Why? Has it got a four poster bed made of skulls?" She giggled.

Ryker stopped moving, his heart thumping. He'd never meet a girl like Lucy. It fascinated him. He briefly considered the possibility of her being the perfect partner in his abductions. Lucy on the other hand had already started opening doors. The first she opened creaked loud enough to sound like busted church bells. The room was void of furnishings. The cobwebs hung low from the ceiling and the dust was like a cloud of ash. Ryker pulled her out harshly and slammed the door closed. The action sent a cloud of dust up into the air, making them both cough.

"First the master room. Then you can explore." Ryker ordered.

"No need to be so short with me. Lead on. Let's go see the master."

Ryker did not speak, he took her arm and pulled her toward the end of the long corridor. After all the preparations he felt like he'd earned his treat, and nothing would stop him from getting it. At the end of the corridor, he opened the large discolored door and pushed Lucy inside quickly, turning he locked the door so she couldn't escape.

"You tricked me. This isn't a master bedroom. This is a torture museum and it is amazing. You really do know me." Lucy said while pecking kisses on both of Ryker's cheeks. He was so dumbfounded that momentarily he was lost for words.

Lucy rushed around the room, picking up the torture devices and inspecting them before moving on to the next one.

“This room is so awe-inspiring, even the fake dried blood looks real. The smell in here is very metallic. I can almost smell death in the air. How’d you pull that off?”

“You really don’t see do you?”

“See what?”

“Just look harder around you. What do you see?”

“Oh, I get it... This is the big surprise. You are going to open this mansion up as a tourist attraction. That is fantastic I have some ideas that will bring in even more horror buffs.”

“No! For fucks sake, Lucy, this isn’t...”

Ryker didn’t want to bother explaining. He swiftly picked up one of the hammers and hit Lucy over the head with it knocking her out. When she came to, she was stripped naked and tethered to the chains. Her legs were spread and her ankles tied down securely to the floor shackles. Lucy looked around the room and found Ryker watching her. She could feel the heaviness of dried blood caked across her neck from the head wound and wondered how long she’d been out.

“Well, this is a turn of events. If you wanted some role playing, I would have only been too happy to comply.”

“Role playing? What kind of sicko are you? This is not a game, Lucy. I am not here to fuck around. I’m here to take you apart bit by little bit. I think I’ll start with your racehorse legs. Those thoroughbred legs of yours are in need of shredding.”

“Whatever game you are playing it isn’t scaring me. I can stay like this for hours. I see the camera snapping at me. Who is operating that?”

“It is automatically set up to take hundreds of pictures. Each time I cut you, remove part of your body, it will capture it and then you’ll end up a piece of art on my wall.”

“Great. I always wanted to be famous. So, who really is behind that, is there a film crew secretly filming me as well. Just let me know because I have to sign a waiver if you intend to show me fully naked. I’m confident enough to let the world see me like this.”

“You seriously think I’m playing?” Ryker said while picking up the hunter’s knife.

“Well, what else can it be? If you aren’t playing, then what?” Lucy remarkably remained calm.

Before she could say anything else, Ryker took the knife and carved a devil's face into her stomach. Lucy didn't even flinch. Not a single cry for help. She laughed loudly remembering how much her mother loved to rise a scream out of her. Born with CIP, Congenital insensitivity to pain, saved her from her mother's inflicted torture. She laughed even louder pissing Ryker off. He stood back angry. He held the knife to her throat and pulled her hair with his free hand.

"Scream for me. Bitch! I want to hear you scream."

"You wish!. There is nothing you can do to me that hasn't already been done. How do you think I got such great smooth looking legs?"

"Fucked if I know."

"If you had bothered to ask, I would have told you. I was abused... burned... cut... tortured by my own mother! I had to have plastic surgery to cover the scars. So again, whatever you do, *you* won't hurt me. I am a congenital analgesia. Do you know what that is? I am a person who doesn't feel pain." Lucy smirked and then smiled.

It angered Ryker so much he pulled her head back and drew the knife across her throat. His cut was precise, just below the arterial arteries and only enough to go half an inch deep. He knew what he was doing and how to make his victims last.

"Well, I am not your mother. My methods of torture will be nothing like what you've experienced."

"You are right, you are not my mother. She was a master at torturing." Lucy laughed mocking him.

"You won't say that when I'm done with you." He stomped across the room. Stopping at the dusty cobwebbed table he picked up a bamboo stick. Spinning on his heels he strode back to Lucy and roughly grabbed her wrist with his left hand while he used his right to insert the bamboo stick under her fingernails. Peeling them off one by one. When she didn't flinch or scream he grew furious and threw the bamboo stick to the floor.

"Oh, you are such an amateur. My mother was so much better at this than you."

Lucy started to laugh when Ryker punched her in the mouth. "Say it again, bitch." He hit her again splitting her top lip.

"Amateur." She said and spat a glob of blood at him. She was aiming for his face but got him in the neck, infuriating him. He fisted both his hands and punched her hard in the mouth repeatedly. Lucy spat two teeth

out and curled her swollen lips into a smile. She glared sassily at Ryker while he viciously punched her.

He abruptly stopped and stood back to admire his work. She didn't look like she was smiling, but he could see she *still* was. The look in her eyes. No fear. No pain.

Lucy's blood had poured down her throat and across her chest. Ryker followed the path of gore and fixed his eyes on her upper body. He was amazed her torso wasn't even heaving. He quickly took her pulse and even that was normal, not racing as he expected it to be. With his left hand he ran his fingers over her arm, the very arm that not only a week ago was stroking his cock, the very arm that cuddled him, the very arm that held his hand. He pushed her arm down roughly and went to the table and picked up a rusty dagger. Lucy tried to giggle, but it came out in bubbles making her laugh harder. To her it sounded like wet farts.

Ryker angrily made his way back to her, grabbing forcefully at her left arm. He began to draw the blade over the top of her forearm down to her wrist. He knew that cutting into her muscle like that would surely get a scream from her, but it didn't. He watched her eyes following his every move. He started to viciously stab at her arm covering a larger area. Savagely, he forced the blade in and out, his tempo growing faster. Still she did not scream.

Ribbons of flesh fell to the floor, along with copious amounts of gore which soaked the area and even where he stood. He stopped suddenly not wanting her to die from bleeding out. Rushing away from her, leaving large bloody footprints, he went to the other side of the room. Off a dusty top shelf, he grabbed some dirty rags. Making his way back to her, he aggressively wrapped her pulverized arm up. Lucy didn't recoil. Her breathing remained steady and calm only aggravating him more. Ryker cast a harsh look at her before thumping her hard in the chest with a closed fist. Still no screams. He hit her again and again, but she still did not scream.

"You fucking, bitch! Why aren't you scared of me?"

Lucy tried to answer, but her words were clogged with fresh blood. With her lips split and swollen the words she tried to form came out garbled.

Ryker desperate to know why rushed out of the room and returned with a pen and pad. Without hesitation he unhooked her right hand and held the pad for her. She looked into his eyes and at that very moment he felt

defeated. The look in her eyes was bright and that of a young woman who was at a carnival. Lucy held the pen, but it slipped out of her hand from all the blood that drenched her. Fuming; Ryker left her and fetched a towel. When he returned he had not seen that she'd managed to unhook her left hand. Keeping it still upright she held onto the chain and kept calm. When he finished wiping her blood-soaked hand, he handed back the pen. She lifted her eyes from the pad he held and bore a look of intensity into his. Rapidly she swung her arm up and stabbed Ryker in the eye repeatedly with the pen. He pulled back screaming. His hands went to his eye and while he tried to pull out the pen she hurriedly unhooked her ankles.

As soon as she was free, she rushed to the table and grabbed the hammer. Without delay she swung it hard into the side of his jaw. So hard she watched a tooth fly out and hit the plasma-soaked floor. Again, she hit him across the face. Repeating until his face looked like mashed up watermelon. When she was satisfied that he was dead, she grabbed the bone saw and cut off his head. Lucy triumphantly mounted it on a shelf and left the room. She stood naked in the corridor for a fleeting minute then went back into the room and fetched the car keys from his dead body, found her clothing and dressed herself.

For the second time in her life she survived being tortured. She would never allow another to hurt her.

She got into the car and drove herself to a hospital out of town. She knew they would be asking questions. She conjured up a story of being in a car accident. In the ER she didn't get to tell them as the doctors and nurses rushed around her. Lucy did her best to speak but with the noise of multiple people treating her she wasn't heard. The doctor's and nurses were so anxious to control the bleeding and repair the damage that they did not hear her. Instead they kept reassuring her that she would be okay.

When Lucy refused the sedative, the doctor grew alarmed. He pulled one of the nurses aside and told her when she'd finished stitching, dressing and cleaning up the horrific wounds on Lucy that she was to call the authorities. Lucy overheard this and immediately plotted her escape. The nurse nodded in agreement to the doctor's request and carried on stitching Lucy's arm up before prepping it for a skin graph.

"I don't know who did this to you sweetie, but the police will catch him. I'm sure of it," the little red headed nurse said, as she left the room. As soon as she was out of sight Lucy sneaked out of the hospital.

She drove herself home. In the morning she sent her boss a text, informing him she had to quit. Feeding him the story of being in a car accident. Lucy waited just over nine weeks for her wounds to heal before seeing a plastic surgeon and then waited another two months after surgery had been done. When she was healed fully she started looking for a new job managing to find a retail position at a nearby men's clothing store.

Having killed her own mother, and now Ryker, she found she thought about them, *a lot*. The taste for blood infatuated her. She planned on carrying on with Ryker's work.

Lucy set out that week to find her first victim.

The End

Infest

Infested

“Gracie, come here please.”

“Yes, Mom.” Seven-year-old Grace put her crayons down and skipped joyfully to Diana.

Her mother was in the dining room at the table with five-year old Adam.

“What is it, mommy?” Grace asked in a sing-song voice.

“Turn around for a minute sweetie, I want to check your hair. You’re scratching non-stop.”

Grace turned around and Diana gently tugged on her golden long hair, moving it to the side, parting it underneath until she let out a ‘Ew’ gasp.

“What is it, Mom?”

“Oh God, you have nits, *again*. Damn... I hate those things. I’ll phone your dad to pick up the special shampoo on the way home from work.” Diana quickly wiped her hands across her apron and went back to helping Adam with his reading.

Grace went back to the living room, picked up her crayons, and started off to her room. Before she left, she called out, “Will they eat my brain?”

“No, silly billy.”

“Then why did you let go of my head so fast and say ‘ew’?”

“Because I don’t like them. They creep me out.” Diana didn’t see any point in telling Grace lies. She hated nits more than anything. They made her itch just thinking about them. What made it worse was seeing their crawling bodies rushing away through her daughter’s head. She shuddered and clenched her teeth. The mere thought of them disgusted her more than spiders.

While Adam practiced his alphabet aloud, Diana went through his hair. He squirmed around making her job more difficult. She was relieved she couldn’t see any through his thick blonde curls. When she finished up with Adam, she sent him to his room to play, took her phone from her jeans pocket and called Rupert.

“Babe, can you pick up some nit shampoo and another lice comb on your way home?”

“I can do that, Grace again?”

“Yep, this makes it the fifth time this year. Either we’re dealing with a super damn nit, or the kids at the school aren’t being treated and it’s going

around and around in bloody circles. Damn it, it seems that just when they are gone, they are back again. I can't get rid of these damn things. You know how much they gross me out."

"I do sweetie. I do. I'll ask the sales person at the drug store if they can suggest something stronger. In the meantime, I guess you will be wanting more mineral oil?"

"Actually, I still have coconut oil, half a bottle of mineral oil and Teatree oil too."

Rupert could hear the stress in Diana's voice. Part of him wanted to chuckle at the notion of how she reacted to nits. The other part of him, the loving part, wanted to support her. If that meant biting his lip until it almost bled to stop himself from laughing, he would. He said his goodbyes and after work he drove to the drug store.

"Mom, I'm home." Fifteen-year old Brad called out from the front entrance, as he slung his jacket and school satchel over the coat rack. He followed Skip his guide dog toward the kitchen. They both could smell the freshly baked cookies.

"Brad, how was school?" Diana asked cheerfully. She stepped in front of him and gave his cheek a peck.

"It was okay. Nothing special. Can I have some cookies?"

"What if I said no?"

"Huh? You've never said no before, Mom. Are you joking with me?"

"Yeah." Diana giggled handing Brad a freshly baked blueberry chocolate chip cookie.

"I see how it is, teasing the visually impaired now, huh?" Brad laughed before sinking his teeth into the gooey goodness, his senses were overloaded with the aromas.

Skip waited patiently by the fridge door. When Diana opened it, he let off a half bark and was rewarded with a large lamb bone. She gave him a pat on the head and stroked down his back. She noticed he was shedding again. Skip eagerly took the bone and went to his corner of the kitchen dribbling over it, sniffing and toying with it for a minute before chomping down.

"Mom, where are the munchkins?"

"Grace is playing with her dolls and Adam is probably playing with his Lego. Oh, and before I forget Grace has nits again."

"Really, Mom? I can't get them again. Please keep her away from me."

“Don’t worry, Brad. I won’t let her get anywhere near your golden locks. And on that subject, don’t you think it is about time you cut your hair?”

‘What? No! Mom, you promised I could grow it. Wait, are you still joking around with me?”

‘Kind of. I am and I’m not. Part of me is serious because of the nit issue, but the other part of me likes the new look. It suits you.”

“Thanks. Can I have another cookie?”

“I guess it won’t stop you from eating your dinner.”

“What is for dinner?”

“Nit soup.”

“That’s just gross, Mom. I’d have expected at least Fried Nits.”

Brad and Diana burst into a fit of laughter which was broken when Adam came in wanting cookies.

“You can have one, and one only. I know if you get more than that you won’t eat your dinner,” Diana said handing Adam a cookie. “Make sure you eat it at the table.” She watched until Adam sat down before she carried on making dinner.

“We are having mamma’s famous meatloaf.”

Brad made a choking noise and Adam parroted him.

“Hey, you two. I know you hate my meatloaf, but tonight you’ll have to suck it up. I have a more important matter to attend to then cooking. I’ll be busy ridding your sister’s head of lice.”

“What are lice?” Adam asked spitting out crumbs from his cookie.

“It is a monster that feeds off young brains like yours and Grace’s,” Brad said through giggles.

“Mommy?”

“Don’t listen to your older brother. He’s being a dingbat.”

“It is true, Adam. How do you think I got blind?”

“Mommy!!!”

“Brad Christopher Chadwick!” Diana spoke sternly.

Brad knew he was in trouble, so he quickly fixed things with Adam. Though he enjoyed the playful banter it was always too easy to get Adam believing anything he ever said. Diana looked at Brad and at that moment she wished he could see her glaring at him. He’d know how serious she was. She had to settle for her stern voice and that irritated her. She hated being the freakish controlling matriarch. With Rupert at work all the time

she had no choice. She had to be both the good and evil versions of herself. In this case, in particular, because she didn't need Adam waking her and Rupert up during the night with nightmares.

"Adam, I am joking. I was born blind, remember? I'm just being silly. As mom said, I'm a dingbat."

"Yes Brad, you certainly are," Diana chided.

"Sorry mom." He picked up Adam and swung him around until he giggled. He put him down and listened to him rushing away back to his room.

Diana peeled and chopped onions and carrots while watching Brad. She admired how well he moved about the house and at times she even forgot he was blind. He carefully pushed in Adam's chair, brushed off the crumbs from the table into his hands and put them into the kitchen sink.

"Do you need a hand with dinner, Mom?"

"No thanks, you can take Skip to your room and do your homework. I'll call when it's ready."

Brad nodded then helped himself to a glass of milk, rinsed his glass and stored it upside down on the counter, just the way Diana liked. He whistled for Skip who looked up briefly, then back down at his bone. He pulled back the blanket over his doggy bed and hid the bone underneath, then he heeled to Brads right side. Together, they disappeared down the hallway. On the way, he poked his head into Grace's room and said hello. She squealed with delight and yanked him inside her bedroom, patting Skip furiously while talking 99 miles per hour about her dolls. Brad sat on the corner of her bed and listened to her making sure he didn't get too close.

"Brad?"

"Yes, Grace?"

"You're not hugging me. How come?"

"Mom said you have nits. I don't want them. Sorry Sis, but this time I'm going to be very careful."

He reached his hand outward and Grace wrapped her warm tiny hand in his.

"That's okay. You can owe me extra hugs when the nits are gone." She snickered letting go of his hand and sat herself in the middle of the room on her carpeted floor. Brad could hear her pick up two of her dolls and set them up ready for a tea party. He quietly left her room for his.

One week later

“I don’t know what to do about these damn nits, Rupert. They are resilient little buggers and now I’ve started to itch. I noticed you’re scratching your head too.”

Rupert turned to face his wife of 22 years, with one hand in his pocket and the other scratching at his head. Diana thought he had the look of a child in the body of a man, as she watched him, waiting on his response.

“I don’t think Grace has them anymore. I think they all jumped her tiny head and have taken up residence on ours. They do feel oddly different. I can’t put my finger on it, something about them isn’t right.”

At that moment, Grace came rushing into the living room and handed Rupert a picture she just finished drawing. She twirled in circles clapping her hands.

“Look what I did.”

Rupert took the picture, eager for the distraction to the incessant itch. He had a good look before handing it over to Diana. Instantly, his hands flung to his scalp. Frustrated, he worked them through. The scratching did not relieve the itch as he had hoped.

“Wow, Grace, this is beautiful,” Rupert said trying to keep his irritation out of his voice.

“Why don’t you tell mommy and daddy what this is. It looks stunning, Sweetie.” Diana used the back of a pen to scratch at the nape of her neck.

“It is you and daddy.” Grace proudly reclaimed her picture and using a fridge magnet she promptly displayed it on the fridge door. Then she rushed back into the living room and jumped onto Diana’s knees.

“Jump me, Mommy.”

Diana nodded and bounced her knees up.

“Higher Mommy!”

Diana bounced so high Grace almost fell off. Through a flood of tee-hees from Grace, Rupert had stood still, growing more and more pale. Diana didn’t think much of it at the time. He now used both of his hands to scratch his head. Instantly making Diana itchy again. She wanted to rush off to the bathroom and rip all of her clothing off to make sure none of them were on her.

“You will scratch right down to your brain if you aren’t careful,” Diana teased.

“You are so funny,” Rupert retorted.

“You love my sarcasm. I know you do.”

“Sure, you keep telling yourself that.”

“What are you two talking about,” Grace asked in an almost demanding tone, annoyed that the bouncing had stopped.

“Nothing for you to worry about. How about you go and get yourself ready for school, but before we go, I’ll need to rub through some coconut oil and give your hair another comb through.”

“But Mom, you did it yesterday.”

“I know but look at how much daddy is itching, and me. If we still have these things, they will just go from us back to you. I want to make sure you have no more eggs in there.”

“Eggs?”

“You know, we talked about this. How the lice lay their eggs and it is when those eggs hatch that we get itchy.”

“Oh, I remember. Okay, Mommy. I’ll get my school bag and shoes.”

“Good girl. Can you also hurry Adam along for me?”

Grace nodded and rushed from the living room down the hall. Her little feet were hardly heard on the carpeted floor. She didn’t knock on Adam’s door, instead she flew in and scared him. He was on the floor playing with his toy helicopters.

“Go to, Mom,” she barked, then left his room skipping to hers. She found her shoes by the toy chest. Got her bag and went skipping back to the living room.

“Mommy why is daddy lying on the couch?”

“He has a headache, Sweetie. Come on let me help you with your shoes and then I’ll do your hair. Maybe by then Adam will be ready.”

Grace sat on the floor in front of Diana. After she thoroughly looked through Grace’s hair she was satisfied that no more eggs and/or living lice were present. She’d work on her own hair when she got back from dropping them off. Brad had already left with Skip. Rupert wasn’t going to work, that much was clearly obvious to Diana, and it irritated her. She liked her space and having him home unexpectedly threw her routine out. She got over it very quickly and accepted it by volunteering to shave Rupert’s hair off.

When she got back from dropping the kids at the bus stop, she took Rupert into the bathroom, pulled out the electronic hair clipper and went straight to work cutting all of his auburn hair off. When she finished, she couldn't understand why he was so itchy, there were no signs of lice at all. Diana did notice the multiple pin head dots that covered a wide portion of his head. She rubbed his newly bald head down with some baby oil and left him to clear away the hair on the floor while she went to tend to the morning dishes. She left the bathroom scratching her own head and thought about doing her hair before starting her household routine. She decided that the chores needed to be done first. Setting her needs aside she got started.

Rupert stayed a little longer in the bathroom after sweeping up all of the hair. He looked into the mirror and found he still itched. He thought he was going crazy. He was just as itchy as before and yet there was no plausible reason for it. He grabbed the oil and rubbed it vigorously all over his head. For now, it seemed to calm the itch down. He went to the hall and picked up the telephone and made the call to his work. After he had hung up, he settled down in the living room with his pipe and newspaper. Sitting in his favorite chair he lit his pipe and tried to read. The constant itching kept interrupting him. He grew impatient and agitated. Kicking back the foot rest on the lazy boy he stood up too quickly and felt dizzy. Once his light-headedness passed he stomped into the kitchen looking for Diana. She wasn't there. He searched the rest of the house until he found her in the laundry room.

He barged into the room, slamming the door open and startling Diana. "I can't stop itching. You have to do something!"

She stood, folding the washing, only stopping long enough to scratch her own head every few seconds. "I don't know what you expect me to do? I've shaved your head, checked, double checked, and Darling you have nothing there. Maybe you were just allergic to the bites of the lice and have to wait it out or visit the doctor for some antihistamine? Maybe I do as well. I can't seem to stop the awful itch."

"Yes, let's do that."

"Do what?"

"The doctors... Let's go there, now!"

Diana stopped what she was doing and gave Rupert a strange look before leaving her chores and fetching his shoes. He exited the house and

backed his car out of the garage, and waited for Diana. She just got in the car and closed her door, when he turned the car off and abruptly got out.

"What are you doing?" She called.

He went around to her side of the car before he answered, as he opened her door. "I am too itchy to drive. Just get me to the doctors, Hon. You can speed, this one time only. Just get me there fast."

Diana looked at Rupert and it was though she was seeing him in a different light, with the sun cascading a shadow over the house it still allowed ample light for her to see how pale he had gotten. It started to worry her. She walked around the front of the car and got into the driver's seat, turned the car on and backed out slowly.

"If you drive this slow, I'll be dead before we get there."

"Gee, you don't have to be so over dramatic. I was only backing out slowly, so I didn't hit the trash cans."

"Right now, I honestly don't care if you scratch up this car. I just need to get this itching to stop. Now!"

Diana said no more, she put her foot to the accelerator and speed toward the doctors. She bottled down her fast approaching anger. She was sure her head was just as itchy as his, and yet she felt he was somehow more important than her. That festered in her mind as she sped faster taking her anger out on driving. In the little town of Whiteville, with a population of 1400, meant nothing was close due to the way the town was designed. The doctors were seven miles from their house, the mall ten miles and the school four. Everyone knew each other and that was one thing about Whiteville that she did like. She hadn't gone more than a mile when she heard sirens behind her. Diana pulled over to the shoulder and waited for the sheriff to approach. She had rolled the window down and out of habit checked her lipstick in the side mirror. She gave a quick glance at Rupert and noticed his face had blotched in red patches. She couldn't figure out if he was fuming or getting sicker.

"Diana Chadwick, what have I told you about speeding. You know I have to give you a ticket, right?"

"I'm sorry Sheriff Hutchison, it's Rupert. He's sick. I'm racing him to the doctors."

The sheriff poked his head through the window and looked over at Rupert.

“Well, he sure don’t look too good does he. I tell you what, I’ll be your escort. Follow me.” Sheriff Hutchison adjusted his tie and got into his car, pulled in front of Diana’s and then turned the sirens on.

Diana checked before pulling out, then got right behind the sheriff’s car. It didn’t take long to get to the doctors. After parking the car she allowed the sheriff to help Rupert inside.

Diane scratched at her head vigorously while standing shoulder to shoulder with the sheriff at the desk, booking herself and Rupert in to see the doctor. He thought she was acting unusually irritated, and he noticed how both her and Rupert’s skin had dried out considerably.

Rupert had already taken a seat in the waiting room. “Thank you for the escort, Sheriff Hutchison,” Diana said.

“You be sure to let me know how Rupert is.”

“I will. Thank you.”

The sheriff went on his way and Diana took a seat next to Rupert. A woman in her late 30’s was sitting next to Rupert. The woman smiled showing lipstick stained teeth. She quickly turned her smile upside down and moved away when both Rupert and Diana scratched at their heads.

When Rupert’s turn came Diana followed him in. She continued to scratch at her head. After the doctor examined Rupert, he had a look at Diana’s head too. Making the same conclusion. They were both allergic to the lice bites. He prescribed some antihistamines and sent them on their way.

Diana made a stop at the drug store and waited for her prescription to be ready. While she waited, she tried on four different lipsticks, several different perfumes and chatted with a pregnant woman, warning her of how wonderful children were at gifting their parents unwanted gifts such as lice. The woman screwed up her face and made an excuse to leave.

Diana was called to the counter when the prescription was filled. She took the brown paper bag, went back to the car and drove home in silence. The only noise was that of both her and Rupert scratching.

At home she smothered Rupert’s bald head with the antihistamine cream and gave him two pills. He took them and went straight to bed. Diana took two pills and carried on with her chores. The itching was still out of control. She found she had to sit on her hands for a while to stop her scratching. She decided the house was good enough and went to shower.

Afterward she applied the antihistamine cream to her head and hated how it stuck her hair down, like she had slathered on men's Brylcreem.

It was worth it to stop the itching, if only temporarily. She hunted through her vanity to find her red scarf. Once she found it, she put it on her head twirling the inside of her hair underneath it. There was no way she was stepping out of the house to collect the kids from the bus stop with hair looking like someone had poured lard over it. When she felt she looked decent enough to go, she got up her courage to leave. She was early by half an hour. When the school bus pulled up, she took Adam and Grace in each hand and walked them home.

Once she got them inside she quickly ripped off the scarf and stood for ten minutes with her back against the front door as she scratched hard. So hard her long nails caused parts of her scalp to bleed. Diana didn't care at that point. She would have torn her own hair out if she believed it would help. Her mind cast back to Rupert, and idly she knew that shaving her own hair off wasn't the answer.

"Mommy, are you coming? I'm hungry," Grace called from the kitchen. Diana could hear the cupboards being opened and closed and she forced herself to move making it to the kitchen with bits of hair tangled between her bloodstained fingers. She washed them at the kitchen sink and got out the banana cake, sliced two slices and put them onto a plate for Adam and Grace. After she put that away, she got them a glass of milk and sat them at the kitchen table where she helped them with their homework for as long as she could. All of twenty-minutes. The itching was disabling her.

"Go play now. I have to cook dinner."

"But Mommy I haven't finished."

"It's okay Adam. Brad will help you finish when gets home. But after dinner okay?"

"Okay Mom." Adam happily raced off to his bedroom.

"Why are you still here, Sweetie?"

"You have red stuff on your hands. What is it?"

"Tomato sauce. Now be a good girl and go to your room."

Grace got down from the table and walked backward to her room while intently watching her mother. Diana put on a smile and waited for Grace to enter her room, then quickly ran into her bedroom and used the bathroom in there to rub more of the antihistamine cream through her hair. It wasn't working. She was just as itchy as before. She came out of the bathroom

with one hand still rubbing aggressively all over her head and the other just dangled limp and exhausted by her side. She'd been using her arms all day to stave off the persistent itching and achieved nothing but sore arms.

She checked on Rupert and noticed he'd still been scratching while he slept. She found herself wondering how he got to be the lucky one to sleep through it all. It irked her. Shrugging up her shoulders in a bitter fit of jealously she caught sight of the time from the wall clock above their bed. It was almost six and she'd not done anything about dinner. She rushed into the kitchen and had to stop to rub at her head unable to focus on the dinner. She decided they could have toast with scrambled eggs. That was easy enough.

Later that night after the kids were tucked into bed, she chatted briefly with Brad, then went to bed herself. Before she got in she smothered her scalp with the antihistamine cream massaging it roughly all over her head. She got into her night dress and climbed into bed noticing that Rupert was whining in his sleep. It gave her some comfort knowing that he was still suffering the same as she was. She turned on her side and for two hours she scratched and could not fall asleep. She got up and took two more of the antihistamine tablets and another hour went by before she finally fell into a deep sleep. Only to be woken two hours later with Rupert screaming at the top of his lungs.

2:36 AM

“Rupert, stop screaming. You’ll wake the kids. What is wrong with you?”

Rupert took a large gulp of air in and tried to calm himself. Diana rolled over and turned the table lamp on and gasped in horror at the blood dribbling down Rupert’s face from his head.

“What have you done to yourself?” Diana couldn’t tell that her own voice had changed, in her mind she still sounded like herself.

When Rupert answered it wasn’t a language that Diana had ever heard before. It was more than alien. It was incomprehensible. She scrambled out of bed almost falling over her feet. As she was rushing out of their bedroom, she couldn’t help but take another look at her husband. He had lesions all over his scalp, face, throat and on his arms that swelled in red welts like bee stings. She turned the hall light on and stumbled when her feet suddenly didn’t work properly.

Grace had heard the commotion, loud grunting sounds and stood scared to death a few feet away from Diana.

“What is it, Sweetie?”

“Mommy... Is that you?”

“What do you mean? Of course, it is me. You can see me, right?” Diana waved her hand up and down and started to walk forward.

Grace backed away.

“You don’t look like my Mommy.” Grace shrieked and then rushed off to her room and slammed the door sobbing loudly.

Diana perturbed by this ran into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. She screamed in horror! She stepped closer to the mirror and carefully poked at her face with her fingers and watched as her skin broke away leaving a hole. Her face was covered in bright red gore. She had the same swollen lumps as her husband. She braved checking out the rest of her body and sure enough her entire body was covered in welts. Each one, when pushed, would disintegrate leaving a gaping cavity as if the pits just concaved from the simplest of touches.

Out of nowhere tremendous pain surged through her body and she convulsed violently. She slid down the wall and sat on the tile floor staining it with her gore. Before her eyes fogged over completely, rendering her in darkness, she saw multiple slug like creatures slithering their way out of

trenches she'd poked. They fell to the tiled floor and wormed themselves around. Then it was darkness. A blackness so inky and cold it seemed to last forever. Eventually, she could see again, though she felt like she was looking through the eyes of a fly. Everything was segmented and distorted. She felt an alien presence taking over and fought against it. With what little human brain she had left she ordered herself to get up, to fight for her life and to save her children.

Perspiration or what she perceived to be sweat trickled down her forehead. Her head no longer itched, but the pain she felt inside was unimaginable. She could feel things crawling beneath the surface of her skull, wiggling around and trying to find a way out. The pressure building up on her brain was like that of having concrete poured on top of her. She knew that something fearful and horrible was happening but was helpless to stop it.

While she stood grabbing at the wall for balance, she felt the wetness from her ear and then a plop sound as something had writhed out and fallen to the floor. She was too fearful to even touch her ear. Diana struggled to walk straight and groped the wall until she found the door and used it to guide herself out of the bathroom. She knew she was now in the hallway, but she didn't know if she was going right or left. Her eyes saw everything like a kaleidoscope of many images. She ran her hand along the wall giving no clues to which way she was going. She heard Skip come out of Brad's room and bark loudly.

"What's wrong boy?" Diana heard Brad call out from his bedroom. Skip didn't stop barking and began to growl threateningly deep in his throat. He stayed stationed at Brad's door and he wasn't going to move.

Diana tried to stop the dog from barking, but the closer she got the angrier the animal became. She backed up and went the other way, groping along the wall until she had reached Adam's room. She opened the door and staggered inside waking him.

"Boy, what is it?" Brad asked again as he stood near Skip. "Who's there?" he called out timidly.

When he got no answer, he moved into the hall. Skip was still barking, teeth bared with a deep guttural snarling. Brad turned toward his parents' room. He heard a loud thump and headed that way. The dog followed, barking non-stop. He wasn't sure if it was a home invasion or if Skip was alerting him to fire. He sniffed the air and smelled nothing. He started to

panic. It didn't help that Skip wouldn't stop barking and the closer Brad got to his parents' room the louder and more aggressive the dog became.

Brad stood at the entrance to the room and pushed open the door. He could hear a grunting over Skip's barking.

"Dad? Mom?"

Brad turned his head when he thought he heard another noise. "Skip! Quiet!" He ordered the dog.

It took a moment, but the dog started to calm down enough that Brad could make out the sound. To him it was like someone was pulling themselves along the carpet. He stepped into the room and listened harder. The noise was coming from the other side of the bed. And he smelled something now... Something metallic.

Sloshing... Pulling... Dragging...

Skip started barking again trying to get Brad out of the room. Brad turned to leave, but something grabbed at his ankle. He let out a terrified yell. Luckily, whoever had snatched at him was weak and had no grip. Brad feared that it was his father and that he'd had a heart attack. He knelt down feeling the ground in front of him but withdrew his hand fast when it touched something damp and cold.

"Dad?"

Again, more grunts and an almost indistinguishable hint of his father's voice was heard amongst the other unintelligible sounds.

"Dad is that you?"

Like a room filled with ghosts an eeriness crept across Brad's back giving him cold shivers. A few seconds later he stretched out his hand and felt around again. When his fingers touched something like thick glue it frightened him. Was it blood? His mind flooded with what it could have been. He quickly scooted backward, pushed himself to his feet and rushed out of the room.

He stopped in the middle of the hallway listening. He could hear Grace bawling, but it was the horrific cries of Adam that got him moving. Those terrified wails went through Brad like an electric shock. His nerves grew rapidly, desperately wishing for his eyesight. He had already past the stage where he could calm himself by humming a song like he did when he was a kid to be rid of his anxiety. He did everything he could to ignore his pounding heart and the vivid images his mind was creating to fill the void

of what he *did not know*. He took a deep breath and headed toward Adam's room.

Brad felt for the door. It was wide open. He stepped in calling Adam. Nothing but a chaos of terrifying cries mixed with furniture and toys being flung about. Skip stayed at the door growling like a rabid wolf. His barks were loud and scary to Brad, who had never heard him bark that way before.

"Adam come to me," he called to his little brother.

There was no reply, just the pathetic whimpers from somewhere across the room.

After a moment Brad called out to Adam again, unsure of where in the room he was. There was too much background noise to pin point him. He could also make out the same grunting sounds that he heard from his parents' room moments earlier.

Finally, Adam stopped crying and pleaded with his older brother. "The monster will get me. Save me Brad. Save me!"

"What monster?"

"That one." Adam forgot his brother's blindness and pointed toward the creature.

"Come to me...Now!"

Adam was too scared to move. He kept his eyes on the thing that resembled his mommy but also looked like a scary beast from one of his nightmares.

"Okay, I'm coming to you. Keep talking to me so I can find you."

Adam nodded then let out a shrilling scream as the mommy-monster sloshed her way toward him. Skip bolted for her allowing Brad to make his move fast. He dashed across the room with his arms outstretched calling for Adam.

"No! This way..." Adam called out in a whine.

Brad was having trouble locating him with all the discord surrounding him. Skip was barking, and it sounded as though the dog was attacking someone. Something let off a series of deep ear-splitting sounds that almost disabled Brad. His hands went involuntarily to cover his ears. He wondered what was in the room with them??? When the screeching stopped he called out to Adam. "Adam what is it? Who is it?"

"I dunno... it... looks like mommy."

"Wait... What? Mom?"

Brad strained to hear anything to back up what Adam was saying, but he couldn't. He thought back to what was on the floor of his parents' room and shivered. Was dad the same as mom? What was going on? His thoughts almost disabling him.

Adam watched what used to look and sound like his mother, eyeballing it confused. He watched Skip tear into it, ripping off the tentacle looking things that had grown across Diana's arms.

Brad heard a loud thud, then Skip yelping in pain. Brad feared for his dog, but more so for Adam.

"Adam, you have to come to me! Please... Come here, so I can get us out of here!" He stretched out his arms. "Please... I can't find you."

Brad heard Skip recovering and coming to his feet. At that moment Adam collided with Brad almost knocking him over. His little arms wrapped tightly around Brad's legs.

Brad scooped him up into his arms and fled the room, whistling for Skip to follow. He could hear Skip rushing at whoever it was again. He worried deeply about him. Then called for him again as he rushed into Grace's room. He swung open the door hard, unintentionally scaring her into a series of harsh hysterical screams.

She hid under her bedcovers and peeked over the top quickly realizing it was just Brad, Adam and Skip.

It was however the dog that kept her fearful. His black lab coat was covered in blood and he bared his teeth in a way she'd never seen before. She looked at Brad. His hands were coated with blood too.

"Brad, Skip is bleeding? Where is mommy and daddy?" Grace questioned through a stream of tears. Her chest rose fast and hard with her struggle to catch her breath.

"I don't think it is his blood." Or at least he hoped not. Brad reached out trying to find her hand to comfort her. He could hear the terror in her voice. "I don't know where mom and dad are. I don't know what is going on. I know that I'm going to get us all out of here. You have to listen to me and do exactly what I say."

"What was that noise?" Grace asked sinking further under the bedcovers away from Brad's questing hand.

The dog faced the bedroom door and let off a series of threatening barks. The noise outside the bedroom seemed to go further into the distance.

Skip finally stopped barking, but he did not desert his watchful post at the door.

“I don’t know. Come on get out of bed. Put your shoes on. We are going outside to get help.”

“Okay,” she whispered and tentatively pushed aside the bedcovers. She swung her little legs over the edge of the bed. Before sliding herself off she strained her tiny ears to see if she could hear anymore weird noises. She could and immediately got back under the covers.

“Grace, I can hear you. Get out of the damn bed. We have to go now!”

“I can’t Brad.”

“Why not?”

“I’m... I’m too scared!”

“Look, I’m right here, and so is Skip. You and Adam are safe. Let’s go.”

Grace looked at her brothers and then around the room. Her favorite doll was sitting just where she’d left it on the kiddies table with a plastic teapot and cups. She slipped out of bed and rushed to the table snatching her doll up clutching it closely.

“Okay did you get your shoes on?”

“Don’t wanna. Can we just go?”

“Yes.”

Brad picked Adam up and sat him firmly across his right hip. Adam wrapped his tiny arms around his neck holding on tightly as he buried his head into the crook of Brad’s shoulder. Brad faced the door and Skip automatically knew to move out of the way.

Brad opened the door. “You be my eyes, Grace. See anything?”

“No.”

“Great, let’s go. If you see something tell me, but don’t scream.” Brad felt his little sister’s tug of acknowledgement on his hand as she held tightly to it. Together they made their way down the hallway and into the living room. Through there and to the right was the front door. As they crossed the living room and got around the corner Grace pinched Brad’s hand sharply. He could hear her drawing in a very deep breath of air before suddenly letting out a horrific scream.

“What do you see Grace, tell me?” He raised his voice to be heard over hers.

“I can’t... I don’t know... I think it’s daddy, but he’s all mushy and bloody and ....” She said through quavering shudders. Brad felt a small

breeze when Skip bolted ahead and tore into whoever, or whatever, was at the front door.

A sloshing, banging from behind alerted Brad.

“Grace what’s behind us?”

Reluctantly, Grace looked back and took in another large gulp of air. She let out a long scream. Her eyes couldn’t believe what she saw. What once was her mother now slithered along the floor like some kind of mutated snake. Unable to look at it any longer she turned toward the door and watched in wonderment at Skip. The dog was hauling Rupert away from the front door.

Finding the courage, Grace starts to pull Brad toward the door. Her tugging on his hand propelled him forward. She releases his hand to open the door and quickly grabbed hold of it again to drag him out. He almost dropped Adam as he stumbled over the threshold.

Grace turned and slammed the door shut.

Brad nearly jumped out of his skin when Grace seized his hand again and shouted, “We have to go now!”

He whistled to Skip and took his collar pointing him forward. The kids fled into the night.

Noon the Next Day

The Chadwick's house was crawling with cops and forensics which had been called in by the Sheriff. A news reporter overheard a detective and a forensic man talking as they examined the limp and deflated skin of something they didn't recognize.

"The little girl said they were her mommy and daddy." The detective said in a skeptical tone.

"Are you kidding? I don't know what happened here, but I would stake my reputation that this mess is not human."

"Then what happened? Those kids were terrified. The oldest is blind and he could hardly speak, he was so upset."

The forensic officer shook his head. "I don't know. It's one for the books. I can only work with the evidence in front of me. Some kind of unthinkable abuse happened here."

"I don't know if those kids will ever get past this. In all my years on the force I've never seen anything like it." Detective Brown said, as he moved from the entrance of the house.

A chief forensic officers' assistant came up to them holding a small jar. Inside it was a small hairy worm

"We're finding these all over the place. Do you want us to collect them all?

The older man studied the creature. He shook the bottle and watched it squirm. "No, we'll let the clean-up crew hose them down."

Unaware, Detective Brown turned to leave with one of those creatures hitching a ride on his pant leg.

The End

DON’T LOOK UNDER THE BED

The Professor

Professor Ben Livingstone taught night classes to a room of 12 students ranging in ages from 22 through to 36 twice a week, Monday and Thursday evenings. He timed his next lecture to coincide with the end of the semester. After having spent three months with the students he had already figured out who he thought would be willing candidates. There were just two more classes left before the semester was over and it was the perfect time for him to tell the class about the urban legend 'The Grazer'.

"The legend was foretold that this creature 'The Grazer' would live underneath the beds of its victims. No one had survived to give an accurate description of what the beast looked like. But what was known so far was that this creature was smart. It would pluck you up quickly dragging its victims underneath their beds. Even the smallest of spaces would see your body being pressed as flat as a flounder, breaking every single bone inside of you, to just get you under the bed. Once it had you under the bed it would feed off you. The feeding would last for one week even though you were already dead."

"Then why has it been lying dormant all these years if this legend is to be true?" Trina said in a sorority bleep.

"Because it hasn't been woken yet." Professor Ben claimed.

"And how pray tell, does one wake such a myth?" Matthew asked doubtfully.

"You don't really want to know that Matthew, because once the words are uttered you die. Or if you are lucky enough to survive it, you then get to put it back to where it came from. But there is only one way to put it back."

"Go on then, tell us. We don't believe you. Isn't that right, guys?" Matthew asked arrogantly.

The group of 12 all eagerly agreed with Matthew and waited the professor to finish the story.

"The way the legend is foretold is that whoever wakes the monster must also be the very same that sends it back. It is said that two or more have to be the ones to release it and they have to all survive to put it back. If one of those who participated in rising the beast die, then the others will die too. Mark my words this is not something you want to mess around with."

“How come there is nothing in the newspapers dating back hundreds of years about this. What is the source of the legend?”

“It dates back as far as the early 1500’s and has been told verbally by witnesses who were not part of the ritual. In other words, if let’s say you have a boyfriend or girlfriend that does not join you in waking the beast, then she/he will not be killed. Meaning they can be witness to your death if they are present at the time and no amount of them helping will ever work. I’ve heard that the monster has been shot, stabbed, and had acid thrown over it, but it still surfaced and went through with the killing.”

“So, you are saying that other family members, including partners of the very people that partake in the waking ceremony of the said beast will not die. So, if I had a child for example she would be safe even if I was killed?”

‘Exactly, Gabby. That is correct.”

“Well, that is not something I’d ever put my child through. Besides I wouldn’t want to be killed,” Gabby said, then added, “I am curious though, as this stuff interests me greatly. How would one perform the ceremony to wake this creature and do you know where it came from?”

“I don’t know where it came from exactly, though I do have my own theories around that. How to wake it is pretty easy. However, because it is a group activity, I won’t be partaking as I’d not want my own children to bear witness to my death. So, what I can do is tell those of you who want to do this how to go about it without uttering the words myself. If you aren’t scared of dying, then let me know and I’ll tell you a way for it to be woken.”

“Hey, I don’t want to die!” Jack said while standing and heading out the door with both hands cupped over his ears.

Another eight left the room without a single word. The remaining three leaned forward in their chairs and waited for Ben to finish the story.

“If anyone else wishes to leave, then do so now,” Ben said, as he looked at each and every one of them. None of them flinched, no muscles moved. Satisfied he carried on.

“In the library downtown is a section on myths and historical events. Hidden inside one of the books titled ‘Myths of Derrylane,’ you will find the first clue to the words needed to unlock ‘The Grazer’. When all of the words have been found, you are to assemble them on a table until you see the full sentence. Then you need only speak those words out loud backward, three times.”

“And how do we send it back to hell?” Kaz asked.

“Reverse the words you have spoken, and it will be put back into hell. But, the second time it can’t be done in the library. You must go to the old milling house on Fort Avenue and climb inside the silo. There you can read the words out loud three times. If you all do this as a group, then it must be all of you that sends the beast back. Be warned if one of you die at the hands of the creature then sending the creature back will be impossible.”

“Okay, so what happens if we can’t send him back and we all end up dead?” Wallace inquisitively asked as he stroked his hand through his oily long dark hair.

“All of Derrylane’s residents will die!” Ben added. It wasn’t part of the legend, but he wanted the group to keep being invested.

“Including you, Ben?” Sue asked, as she looked directly into his hazel eyes.

Ben didn’t answer. Instead he stood up and gestured to the group that the session was over. Exasperated sighs were rife and the three of them chatted amongst themselves as they excited the room. In the corridor they hovered, debating with each other about actually heading to Derrylanes library and reciting the words. Each of them decided that they would play along and arranged to meet up in the library.

What Ben neglected to tell them is that he had seen this happen before. When he was a small boy, he witnessed his parent’s death at the hands of the beast. This sparked his need to have ‘The Grazer’ killed once and for all. It had become his lifelong mission. Until the creature was gone for good, he would never rest.

The Library

“I found it,” Wallace shouted across the room.

The librarian sternly walked up to him, tapped him on the shoulder and when he turned around, she put a finger to his lips and mouthed hush. She didn’t blink, her lips were not in the friendly smile that greeted them when they first entered. Now they were upturned and crooked at the corners. Wallace blinked repeatedly. His surprise demur seemed to satisfy the strict librarian, but as she walked away she turned sharply and held her finger up to her own lips and mouthed the word ‘hush’, then like a magician she was gone, back at her table at the front of the library. Wallace let a shudder run down the length of his spine. His thoughts on his very catholic mother. He could feel his ears burn at the memory of her scolding him for making too much noise.

“Show us,” Sue said very quietly. Wallace hadn’t heard her and found himself looking dumbfoundedly into her blue eyes. “Show us,” she said again, this time reaching for the book in his hands. He let her take it. She opened it up and inside was the first clue. Her eyebrows pulled upward at the word staring at her, ‘Rogue.’

“What the hell does this word even mean?” she whispered. Her eyes kept scanning it. Wallace grabbed the book from her and another line of text was directly underneath ‘Rogue’ that was written in red ‘Look at the back page of the book titled Puzzlement.’ He read to himself standing still for a few moments wondering where this book would be. He made a decision to ask for assistance and strode quietly up to the librarian and patiently waited for her to finish with a young boy checking out a book. Before he had a chance to ask her where the book was located he was whisked away by Sue who directed him to a section of the library he’d never been before. He couldn’t help but pause, infuriating Sue.

“What are you doing Wallace?”

“Dunno, I haven’t seen these kinds of books before. I guess I am just drawn to them.”

“That’s crazy talk. Let’s go. I have a good idea of where to find the book we need.”

Reluctantly, Wallace followed Sue and soon she was pulling at the spine of several books on the shelves. She started at the right and directed him to

start at the left. Just before they met in the middle Sue found the book. She quickly opened it and turned to the last page.

“What is it?” Wallace quizzed while he inched himself as close as he could to see the book.

“It is a riddle book, and this one here, the one on the back page is also a riddle.”

“Kaz had been standing behind Sue and Wallace. Neither of them noticed until she startled them when she read out the riddle.

“Vertebrae and ribs. Skull and phalanges. Femur and sternum. What are all of these?”

“Bones,” Sue blurted. She quickly craned her head toward the front of the library ensuring that the crabby librarian didn’t hear her. When nothing happened, she refocused on the book and agreed with the others.

“That riddle was far too easy. Are you sure this is the right one?” Sue asked.

“It has to be, look at the words underneath that.” Wallace said as he held the book closer to Sue and Kaz.

“Where the recipes are, you’ll find the gingerbread pig.”

“God, what kind of clue is that?” Kaz bit her bottom lip and looked down the labyrinth passageways with six-foot-high book shelves, all stacked neatly and in chronological order.

“This clue... it has something to do with food. I’m heading to the cooking section.” Sue wandered off. Above her in illuminated green were signs stating the genres. She went past the horror, thrillers and other fiction books headed for the non-fiction area. Her eyes scanned every illuminated sign until she spied the one she was looking for. “General –Cookbooks.” Wallace had caught up with the others and felt out of place in the section.

“Where the heck do we even start,” He asked.

“Well, I guess we break it down. Find cookbooks on sweets, desserts, that sort of thing,” Kaz suggested. She thumbed through the categories until she found desserts. It was three rows and each row was 15 feet long and the same six feet high as all the other bookshelves. “This is going to take forever,” Kaz grumbled.

“It won’t. There are three of us, one on each shelf,” Sue offered.

“I guess so,” Wallace said as he started at the back of the first row.

Sue took the second. Kaz took the third. Two and a half hours later, Wallace found the book. At least, he believed it to be the one. It had a huge

picture of a gingerbread pig on the front cover. He opened it and a single bit of paper fell out. It floated like a feather to the ground.

Sue picked it up and read it out loud. “What do you do three times a day?”

“How the fudge knuckles are we supposed to decipher this one?” Wallace despondently asked.

The three of them sat at a rectangle brown table and spread the book out, first going over the image on the front cover. Many suggestions were made, some ludicrous thought Sue, who started to think the whole thing was made up. That the professor was just lying. It wasn’t until Sue mentioned that she was hungry that Wallace figured out the last clue.

“It is eating or eat, that is what we do three times a day. Well, some of us, more or less, but it has to be that.”

“Well, put all the words together and see if they fit,” Sue chimed in.

Wallace unzipped his backpack and buried his hands deep inside hunting for a pad and pen. He finally found them and put them on top of the table. He hadn’t even zipped his backpack up when Sue grabbed the blue pen and wrote down the words. They all looked quizzing at them.

‘Bone Eat Rogue.”

“Nope it can’t be that. I think it is this.” Lou grabbed the pen and pad and scribbled down. ‘Rogue Bone Eater.’

The others looked and agreed that it could be that. So, they followed through with the professor’s instructions and wrote the words backwards before saying it out loud. Together they spoke the words, ‘Eugor Enob Retae’ and repeated it the three times. They looked at each other with a, what-do-we-do-now look.

Sue stood up and grabbed her backpack and let it hang from her right shoulder. “I’m going to get going.”

“Wait, Sue. Don’t you want to talk about what we will do if this comes true?” Kaz questioned with a pleading look on her small, square shaped face.

“I don’t think it will do anything. I’ve had my doubts about this the entire time. I was just doing this for fun.”

“So, you don’t believe the professor?” Wallace sounded crushed, as if he’d just been dumped by his high school sweetheart.

“I thought you all figured that this was just some hocus pocus stunt. The end of the semester kind of thing.” Sue said while fiddling with the strap on

her backpack.

“I don’t know. I think I believe the professor. I mean why would he make up such an elaborate story?” Wallace asked.

“Maybe, but I’m tired and hungry. We can meet up Monday morning and discuss it more.” Sue started to leave.

“Meet where?” Wallace questioned.

“Here. Let us all meet back here, say 8 a.m.” Sue waited for them to agree and then she left, headed straight for her bus stop.

No sooner had she sat down when her stomach growled so loudly she felt embarrassed knowing that the couple sitting next to her at the bus stop could hear it. Sue pretended not to notice, but she knew her face gave her away as it burned red hot. Once her bus came, she got on and then off at her stop and on the way to her little one-bedroom unit she made a stop at fast food place. After she purchased a combo to go, she walked the block home and entered her tiny unit.

She put her backpack down, sat on her two-seater and switched the TV on. She dug her hands into the brown paper bag and pulled out her burger and chips. After she had finished eating, she relaxed with her feet up watching a documentary on wild animals. She fell asleep half way through and woke up to her alarm bleating at her, 6 a.m. on the dot. She stood up and laughed. Laughed at the notion of the professor’s tales and at her idiocy for believing even if for a little bit. She went and changed into her running gear and took herself out for her morning run. When she completed her ten-mile run, she returned home smiling at the neighbor who was leaving for work.

Sue made her morning coffee and toast, then showered and headed out to meet up with some friends, she’d planned to hang with over the weekend. She couldn’t stop giggling on the ride over. The very notion of what Professor Ben had told her, and the others, was becoming more and more farfetched. It was so unbelievable that she had tears running down her cheeks from laughing.

The 1st Week-Wallace

By the time Wallace got home his 180 pound Great Dane, Thor had destroyed the living room, *again*. Foam from the couch and chairs littered the floor like blobs of snow. Bits of material lay like scattered feathers after a cockfight. Thor rushed up to Wallace so unexpectedly that he had no time to brace himself and with the power behind Thor, Wallace tumbled backward and landed hard on his ass. All he could do was burst into laughter as Thor eagerly licked his face and drooled masses of glutinous glop everywhere.

"You hungry, boy?" Wallace pushed Thor's face off his and stood up. Thor wagged his tail so hard and fast it sounded like a toy helicopter. The dog eagerly followed Wallace into the kitchen and hungrily waited at the fridge. Wallace opened it and Thor let off a short but very loud bark. "You approve don't ya, boy."

After Wallace had fed him, he made himself a triple cheese toasted sandwich and sat down on the one chair left intact. He'd have to replace his furniture for the fourth time. He didn't mind, having inherited two million dollars when his parents died. He had the money to buy the whole furniture store if he wanted. He snickered to himself with that thought as he put his dishes into the sink. He went off to brush his teeth and change into his pajamas and then entered his bedroom. Wallace rolled his eyes and huffed up his shoulders.

"Really... Thor! Get off the bed. You know better." Thor looked up at Wallace, then he quickly buried his head into the soft pillow and whimpered.

"Okay fine, but move over, you take up more than half the damn bed."

Thor let off a happy bark and moved over until Wallace had got into bed, then he lifted his right paw and let it flop across Wallace's chest.

"Damn it, Thor. You are too heavy, you are going to break my ribs. Get off!" Thor let off a series of barks in protest to being pushed over. "Stop barking or you will have to get off the bed entirely," Wallace firmly said.

Thor settled and gave off a disapproving whimper before he settled back down with his head to paw and closed his big, dark brown eyes.

"Finally," Wallace said as he turned himself over and drifted off to sleep only to be woken by Thor barking aggressively. Wallace rubbed at his tired

eyes and reached over to turn the side lamp on. When he moved he realized quickly that Thor wasn't in the bed, but instead he was at the foot of the bed in a low stoop growling at the base. He would rush forward, then rush backward all while hunched downward. Like he did when he was chasing the waves at the beach as they came crashing ashore. Wallace rubbed at his ear which was burning from the loud growling and barking.

"Stop that boy. Come up here."

Thor briefly stood erect and looked at Wallace. Then he directed his muzzle at the base of Wallace's bed and growled furiously before unexpectedly backing up toward the door whimpering. Wallace was wide awake now and his mind entombed him with what the professor had said. Without looking under his bed, he rushed Thor out of his room and into the living room. When he sat on the floor Thor nestled down beside him and rested his face across Wallace's lap. Something warm and wet was soaking into his pajamas. He looked down and gasped while his heart beat as fast as a freight train. His stomach somersaulted, and his brain felt as if it were swelling. Thor's nose had a large, deep gouge down it and it was bleeding profusely. He knew his loving pet would be alright, it was what had hurt him that caused Wallace great concern. He got up and motioned to the bathroom. Thor looked up briefly before lowering his head to the floor yelping. Wallace returned with a cup of water, some iodine and a sterile dressing.

"Boy, whatever hurt you did a real number on your nose. I know this hurts but it is the best thing for you until the morning. I'll get you to the vets."

Thor howled. He hated going to the vets and acted like a puppy. His jaw pulled back when Wallace sponged the blood away and to Wallace it looked as though his dog was grimacing. When he finished cleaning and bandaging up Thor's nose he disposed of the dirty and used items, then stood facing his bedroom. With the door wide open and the bed in full view he saw nor heard anything. At that moment he wondered if Thor's injury was from a rat that had gotten in, or a squirrel.

He hesitantly took a step into his bedroom and approached his bed cautiously. When he reached the foot, he got onto his knees and lowered himself to take a look under the bed. It was dark, and he could see nothing. With a big loud sigh, he turned around, leaned his back up against the base and just sat there feeling ashamed for believing the professor. At twenty-

eight years old he felt ridiculously stupid. He could feel the fear leaving and his heart regulating itself giving him clarity. He looked up and was surprised to see that Thor hadn't returned to his bedroom. Wallace whistled and called out his name. But the dog did not come. He whistled and called out Thor, three more times.

"That is odd. It isn't like you to be disobedient." Wallace spoke while using the back of the bed to get himself up into a stand and as he moved he felt his pajama top snag on the base of the bed and he didn't want to tear it. So, he carefully put his arm behind his back and felt for the culprit when he flinched at the feel of a hard, sharp object. Immediately he withdrew his hand and spun his body around tearing a hole in his pajamas. But when he did look, there was nothing there. He used his right hand to feel along the base and felt nothing sharp. He put his left hand across his back and swiped the area. He felt only the frayed torn material. Confused, he knelt down again and lowered his body until he could poke his head down low enough to look underneath the bed.

Again, he saw nothing until he was about to right himself into a sitting position when something caught his eye. It was at the far back end of the space underneath the bed. Something glowing like white shiny florescent bulbs. It moved with a slight sway, as if the unseen body prowled like a wolf. Wallace stilled. The eyes did not. With rapid acceleration and a more bounding motion it came for him. In less than a second he was on his stomach gasping for air. The thing under the bed grabbed him, slicing the tip of his nose off and carving a deep scratch across his left eye.

Wallace let out a shrill scream and tried to break free from the creature's death grip. He squirmed and hollered out for help. He could hear Thor barking non-stop at the entrance to his bedroom. The dog refused to enter. He just stood there barking and whimpering in succession of one another, a terrifying distressing cry emitting from the dog echoed around the room. Wallace could only hope that it would disturb the neighbor enough for him to call the cops. But unbeknownst to Wallace the neighbor had gone away for a week and the other nearest neighbor was out partying, so no one was around to hear the dog's cries nor that of the horrific bloodcurdling screams of Wallace.

"Fuck off. Let me go!" Wallace wailed.

The creature squeezed its talon hands around Wallace's right arm and he felt his bones breaking. The pain was so intense that Wallace passed out.

The creature worked fast, finishing with Wallace's right arm, it then worked on the left, compressing it until the bones were all ground into a chalk like dust. The monster then used one of its long talons and sliced up Wallace's arm and lowered its head down and sucked out his blood, muscle, sinew and the dusty bones. When everything was sucked away all that was left was Wallace's flesh, which looked like a deflated balloon. The demon did the same to his other arm, greedily sucking out all the ground up bone, mixed with dark blood and sinew, until nothing was left except the thin membrane of Wallace's skin. The Grazer then placed a hand on either side of Wallace's face and squeezed hard, so hard that his eyes began to bulge outward before being completely forced out of the sockets and drooped like sagging rotten tomatoes from a vine. The violent sound of crushing bone rent the air with an eerily echo. Whatever bones left were ground to dust. With the powerful jaw from the demon like creature, that breathed out toxic gas like fumes in a swirling vortex, its unnatural head moved side to side assessing what bones might be left to devour. It hadn't the brain to reason, but instead a primal urge of unadulterated rage wrapped with an indomitable will to annihilate.

When the bones were all crushed and grounded into that same chalk-like texture the creature used his sharp talon to make an opening across Wallace's left cheek and put its vacuum like mouth over the incision and sucked. When it did its cheeks drew inward making it look like two small holes had formed on the creatures already grotesque face. It was oblong in shape, no hair and no eyebrows. A flat top and a bumpy forehead with spikes that looked like vampire's teeth. Its mouth had a mouth within and when the first mouth opened the second elongated outward acting like a vacuum hose.

It squashed every bone in the body enough to get the human fully under the bed, where the creature would perch over it suckling the bones from different areas until all it had left was the flesh. This is where its first larger mouth played a role. It would bite down on the skin tearing it like a dog shreds the last bit of meat off a tough bone. After the beast had torn the skin into thousands of bite size pieces, it would store them unceremoniously under the bed where it would then use the inner mouth to suck them up and swallow them whole only afterward snacking on them bit by bit, savoring every mouthful over a week-long period.

Thor cried for three days and pined desperately for his master. He was hungry but had survived barely by drinking toilet water. He managed to free himself from the house via a window in the laundry. It was a tight squeeze but after a few attempts he made it out. He travelled up the street, and into a nearby park and howled. He stayed there howling on and off for the next four days. Complaints had been made to the local dog pound, and they came and took him. He was fed, and a vet was called in, apart from being malnourished he was otherwise healthy. His nose injury had almost fully healed, and the vet along with the pounds owner couldn't figure out why he was out and alone starving.

His microchip was scanned, and an attempt was made to return the dog. But Wallace wasn't picking up his phone nor answering his door. The pound assumed he'd left the dog on purpose. Thor was up for adoption, though the pound official didn't hold out much hope given the dog's estimated age of six. It didn't stop him from trying, and eventually a couple who had lost their Great Dane took Thor in as their own. Adoption was set for one month after they had him. Allowing more time for Wallace to come forward, but he never did. After that, Thor made regular visits to his old home, sat on the front steps and howled.

The Meeting

“Give it another half an hour, it doesn’t mean anything if he doesn’t show. I mean I’m here, and so are you Kaz.” Sue chided cheerfully.

“Yeah, I guess so. Wallace probably is playing tricks on us by not showing up, making us think he was a victim of the professor’s alleged creature. You know what else, who is to say that he and the professor aren’t in cahoots together?” Kaz spoke while she fiddled with her ponytail.

“You have a point. None of us know each other really. Heck I don’t know a thing about you Kaz.” Sue said pleasantly.

“Not much to know about me really. I’m just your average twenty-two-year old. Out of work, loves adventure and falls for the legends such as the one the professor told us about.” Kaz burst out in giggles.

“Same. Though I’m one year older than you and I’m working part time at a diner. I’m between boyfriends at the moment.” Sue smiled as she spoke and felt that it would be the start of a new friendship with her and Kaz.

“Yep, but I’m glad we are doing this. It is nice to get to know you.” Kaz toyed with her ponytail again rarely making eye contact.

Sue watched her inquisitively and wondered why she was so shy. She was a pretty woman with long dark hair that she had always tied up.

“Well, it has been 40 minutes, I don’t think he’s coming.” Sue made her way toward the exit.

Kaz walked out with her. They stopped off at a local café and ordered a muffin and coffee each. Then they went their separate ways agreeing to talk with the professor after class that night.

After the class finished both women waited for the other students to leave and then they approached Ben.

“Wallace didn’t meet us like we had planned and he’s not here. Do you know where he is? Did he phone in sick?” Sue asked quickly.

Her mind played tricks on her and for a moment she looked at the professor as though he were the devil. Her attention refocused and both her and Kaz waited for him to answer.

“No, he didn’t call in sick and I’ve not seen him. Tell me something ladies, did you find all the clues and read the words backward? Before you answer, I do not want to know what the word is. Remember, I have a family to think about.”

Sue watched Kaz and noticed that she was about to give away the words, so she quickly elbowed her in the side and gave her a smile while shaking her head in a no signal. Kaz reluctantly agreed with Sue.

“Okay... fine. We won’t say the word. We did find all the clues. At least we assume it was all of them. We wrote the words backward and repeated them aloud three times per your instructions. Nothing happened as you can see. We are all here safe and sound. Well... Okay... Wallace isn’t here, but that doesn’t mean anything, does it? I mean you can phone him, right?” Kaz lifted her gaze from the floor to meet that of the professor’s and she caught a look in his eyes that she found hard to read.

“I will phone him when I get home. You are all safe because as I told you before the creature will eat a human for one week before it moves onto the next one. But you may believe me, and you may not. It is up to you. Now if you’ll excuse me I have many papers to mark and my family is waiting on me. I’ll see you all again Thursday night.”

The professor gave a pleasant smile and walked out of the class room leaving the ladies standing around to process the information.

“I don’t recall him saying that the other day... about the monster eating the bodies over a week long period. Do you?” Sue trembled.

“I vaguely do. Something about it is familiar. So, I’m thinking he did make mention of it,” Kaz said lightly. Unsure of herself.

“Well, with Wallace not showing up, this thing could be true. It is so hard to know for sure. I did do some of my own research to see if such a thing existed, and guess what Sue? I found nothing. That’s right nada, zip, a big fat nothing.” Kaz held her head down and without making eye contact she grabbed her bag and started off. “I’ll see you on Thursday for our last class of the semester.” She walked out of the class room and disappeared down the corridor.

Sue stood watching her leave and shrugged up her shoulders wondering why she didn’t agree to the offer to go out for drinks or to get together before Thursday. It bothered her, and she found herself bringing up old insecurities.

When the following Thursday’s class had ended and there was still no sight of Wallace, they stayed back to talk more with the Professor.

“Did you make contact with Wallace?” Sue practically pleaded her question out.

“I did. He had a family emergency, but he wouldn’t say what. He did say he would be back in time for the second semester.” The professor could see the immediate relief across the faces staring at him. He hated telling them such a lie, but it was imperative for them to carry on as normal as possible without drawing in any unwanted attention. Once those two were consumed by the creature he’d figure out his next group. Determined to end the monster once and for all.

“Well, that is good news. I was going to file a missing report with the police,” Sue said as she stood with a smile that wasn’t going anywhere. It was plastered across her delicate features like a child smiles at the sight of a rainbow for the first time.

“I have to ask, why did you make up this legend,” Kaz quizzed.

“It isn’t made up. I guess it was a legend that died a long time ago. I believe once upon a time that it was very real.”

“Stupid legends. I’ll never buy into this shit again,” Kaz mumbled before bursting into contagious laughter.

Sue and the professor joined in. Though the professor’s laughing was more of a gloat. He knew what was coming, and he felt grateful that the semester had finished. He wouldn’t have to explain anything when the creature came for them.

He stood up from his desk and made his way out. In the doorframe he stopped and turned to face the two of them. “I’ll see you two next semester.” He didn’t wait for replies, instead he used the ball of his feet, swiveled himself around and walked briskly out of the room practically skipping down the long hallway. He pushed on the double doors and exited out into the car park.

“Do you have plans over the break?” Kaz asked Sue, as they walked out of the classroom together.

“Actually, I have a few friends I’m seeing Friday, after a semester finishes we go on a long weekend drinking binge. You know like Friday through to Sunday. You should join us?”

“That’s okay I really have to get a job. That is what I’ll be doing this weekend and then the following week, and so on until I find one. Have fun on your drinking binge though and perhaps we can get together later over the break. Here is my number if you are keen, give me a buzz.” Kaz wrote down a fake phone number. She had no intentions of getting together with

Sue. She just wasn't into the drinking and partying scene. She hastily left the building turned briefly and waved goodbye to Sue.

Sue was true to her word. She hung with her friends from Friday through to Sunday and arrived home Sunday evening so drunk that she collapsed onto her bed, clothing and all.

The 2nd Week-Sue

Sue woke to a damp stickiness that irritated her awake. She put her right hand to her face and felt around. She crinkled up the corners of her lips and her eyes blinked in the darkness. Immediately she knew from the lumpy wet mess smothering her cheek along with the offensive smell that she'd passed out in her own vomit. It sickened her enough to cause another bout of puke to force its way up her throat and fill her mouth with a searing bitter heat. She rushed off to the bathroom and only just made it. With her head down the porcelain bowel she retched until she couldn't anymore.

After she cleaned up she stumbled back to her room tripping on her shoes and catching the corner of her right upper eyebrow on the side of the bed. She sat there like a sprawled-out ragdoll holding her eye in fear that she'd have a massive shiner. Sue started to get an icepack but felt resistance. For a moment she thought she had caught her skirt on the bed's base and cursed herself for not having screwed the screws flush. It was the only thing that made sense, until she felt the coldness of hands grazing across her back and underneath her hair where, without hesitation, they carved deeply from one end of her neck to the other.

Sue flung both of her hands to the back of her neck and it was then that her heart felt like it had just stopped. Her fingers touched something rough and aged. To her it was like brushing up against that of a fleshy uneven skeleton. She timidly ran her fingers up the length of its hands and winced loudly when she sliced her own fingertips wide open on the talons of the creature. At the same time, she could feel the warmth of her own blood as it trickled down her back from the gaping gash the monster had cut in her neck. Plasma was oozing out between her fingers and running down them, collecting into her palms. What she felt next paralyzed her with terror. The feeling was like someone had stuck a wet-n-dry vacuum across the back of her neck. With the suction of an octopus it drank from her like a vampire.

When the thing finished draining from her neck it forced both of her hands into its mouth and lapped up all of her spilled blood. The pain in her shoulders from having her hands kept behind her back was crippling her. When it finished with her fingers, it let them go and she quickly brought them to her lips and blew on them hoping that would ease the pain. Its other hand still held onto her and she couldn't escape.

Her heart pounded in the tips of her fingers and deep inside of her chest it was cold, deathly cold. At that moment Sue felt as though her heart had been chopped up into pieces and was now in each of her fingers. Her dark hair was stained bright red. She started to scream, but the creature was fast. It reached with its greying arms around the front of Sue and pulled her backward. The back of her head collided with the foot of the bed repeatedly until the creature had her lying flat on her back. She could smell the demon, and the stench that it oozed from its double mouth had her bringing up what little bile was left in her stomach.

When Sue tried to wriggle out of its grip, she could feel her hair being pulled from the roots. A surge of pain filled her skull and ran down her spine to the very bottom of her feet. Right at that moment she felt like she had been electrocuted. The creature yanked on a section of her hair so hard and fast she'd been left with a large bald patch and more searing hot liquid ran down her back. Sue let out a fox like scream before gritting her teeth in excruciating pain.

Each time the beast pulled and ripped sections of her hair out she felt like she was the ocean floor being repeatedly pounded by an anchor. The weight she felt pushing her into the floor made her feel as though her ribs were going to be crushed at any moment. Yet the creature hadn't moved from under her bed, it stayed there letting its extra-long arms do its bidding for it. When it tired of pulling her hair out from the roots it slowly ran its scalpel sharp claws along the side of Sue's face. As if taunting her, without stabbing or scratching, it used the tips of its claws to almost tickle the side of her cheeks playing with her.

Sue couldn't help but notice that whatever blood this creature spilled from her was not making it to the floor. She could feel its mouth suckle up her spilled blood and she shuddered. It was carefully lapping it up while still torturing her. No amount of screaming released her. Her throat had started to feel like used bits of sandpaper. Her arms grabbed at the monster's arms and pulled but she wasn't strong enough. His arms never left her face, instead those sharp knife-like nails dug deep into her flesh from her right ear to her left, swiftly cutting off a section of skin so deeply that she felt as though her face was being ripped open by a shark's bite.

A darkness smothered her. She thought she was blacking out, but quickly realized she wasn't when she felt the powerful jaws of the monster drinking feverishly, hungrily and making a god-awful slurping sound

against her freshly cut up face. Her stomach churned, and a whirlpool of stinging shocks attacked every nerve. She tried to wriggle free, and when that failed she thrashed her body into an arch up and down motion until she tired and let gravity win.

She had no idea of how much time had passed, but she knew it had been long enough for the sun to start lighting the room. Somehow it terrified her more, the very idea of seeing what was under her bed, to come face to face with the monster that was making a hamburger patty from her very body sent her panic into overload.

The fetor of dried blood filled the space between the evil savage and her torn apart face. It was a sickening smell of metal and offal blanketing the air in a choking aroma. Sue was unable to breathe it in any longer and let out a wounded cry cutting the air like a distant fog horn. She couldn't move, couldn't scream and couldn't cry anymore.

The demonic thing placed its scrawny yet powerful hands across each of her cheekbones and squeezed. The pressure she felt was insurmountable even for her brain to register. The last thing she saw before dying was a gray arm reaching for her upper chest, while a mouth with too many teeth to count, bit down on her face. Her ears heard the crunch and snap and a grinding before she heard nothing more and died. Brain matter, white and gray mixed with cerebral fluid leaked out of her eyes, nose and ears before the monster feasted aggressively.

The beast crushed her bones up until she was just a fleshy pancake and then he pulled her lifeless skin under the bed and began his ritualistic week-long feeding.

The Professor Part 2

Ben vowed at the age of 11 to seek revenge and sort out many ways to finally put the beast back to hell. In his mid-twenties he travelled around the world in search of ways to put the demon creature back from where it came. Finally, he found out through an old woman in Italy that the only way to send the monster back for good was to wake it first and to have all those involved in its awakening to send it back to hell. It had to be done in that order. Otherwise, it would continue to kill.

With the information he collected he set out his career as a history professor and whenever there were a group he felt dumb enough to go through with the ritual he'd tell them the story and wait for them to either fail or succeed. Four groups over the last ten years had been through the ritual and none of the groups prevailed. He didn't have a wife or children. He used that lie to escape being a participant in the ritual. He also neglected to tell them that once all participates were dead that the beast went back into hiding.

He went to his two-bedroom apartment and carried on as if everything was normal. At thirty-seven he was feeling frustrated that no one had yet been successful. That night he tossed and turned with horrific nightmares. He relived the night his parents were taken by the creature under the bed. When he told the authorities they believed he was in severe shock from his parents abandoning him. No bodies were ever found and there was no evidence of a break in, or any form of struggles. No blood or bones.

Ben kept up his story from the tender age of five when it happened through to when he was 11. He had been to see multiple therapists throughout those years and reliving the tortured sessions were painful. With the realization that no one would ever believe him, he recanted his story and started telling people that his parents had run off and abandoned him. To this day, Ben still slept with the lights on. He had bolted up his closet door and swapped out his bed for a thin futon. He couldn't bring himself to ever sleep in a bed, though he desperately desired one.

In the morning before he got up he looked at the ceiling and let his mind drift. Filled with guilt he had given up trying to free that part of his mind, it was like it was bait and his thoughts were an eager fish. He repeated the same thing over and over, "I have to do it." Justifying himself was all he

could do to shut up his guilty thoughts of luring in young adults to kill the demon.

He got up with a tight twisted expression across his aging face. His back pulled and ached like bricks had fallen directly onto the middle lower section of it. He leaned forward and stretched as much as his tender back would allow. He then bent backward before doing side stretches desperate for any relief. He thought about how many more years it would be he could sleep on the futon. He gazed vehemently at it and abruptly kicked it, and gritted his teeth angrily when his back went into spasms. He needed a firm mattress, and he had to remind himself that it would be soon. That it would be when the creature was returned for good.

He had high hopes for those inquisitive naïve minds and he was angry when they failed. “Can’t anyone do this fucking right? Jesus, what a bunch of useless imbeciles. For fucks sake!” He spoke out loud and all he managed to do was aggravate his already painful back.

He took in a few deep breaths and waddled off to have his morning shower, which eased up his aching back enough for him to stop walking in a stoop. Standing more erect he grabbed his jacket and car keys from the hall table and left. He got into his Ford truck and scrunched up his face when he lowered himself into the seat and it triggered another back spasm. He waited for the convolutions to stop before he turned the car on and drove to Derrylanes only College ‘Oak Hills College’.

He collected the test papers that he’d forgotten and then took himself on a long drive out of town. His thoughts on the new students joining the second semester and who he would convince with another telling of the legend to do the job right, once and for all. After his long drive he returned to Derrylane still feeling miserable.

The 3rd Week-Kaz

Kaz had mostly forgotten the legend foretold by her history professor, Ben Livingstone. She had gone out that Monday morning into the heart of Derrylane in the hope of finding a job. Every shop she entered she was told the same thing. We aren't hiring. Despondently she took herself to a local bar and had a few virgin drinks before heading home. After making herself a meal she watched TV until she grew bored and found herself on her laptop searching for jobs. Midnight had rolled around, and she was still on her laptop, the job searching all but forgotten as she was now watching YouTube tutorials on makeup. She eventually tired and took herself to bed just after 1:00 a.m.

Before sleep took over she gave thought to her ex-boyfriend and a sadness swallowed her up, followed by a bitter hatred which filled her core. Catching him with her best friend had sent her over the edge. She didn't want to remember but it was as though her mind insisted. She hit her pillow with a closed fist and let her tears roll down her cheeks. Without even noticing she had fallen asleep crying.

Kaz felt a breeze brush against her face and in her sleepy state she pulled up the blanket covering her head. Unconsciously, Kaz pulled the blanket back over her face a second time. It had been pulled down by an unseen force. Like a game her blanket peeled back repeatedly, and she would pull it back up over her face until she felt and heard the howling wind which penetrated her ears like a furious storm. She bolted up right and took in her room. Her eyes moved but her head stayed perfectly still. She was too scared to move, but she didn't know what she was scared of. When she saw nothing she tentatively put her legs over the side of the bed having decided that a glass of water was needed. Just as her feet touch the floor she felt a razor-sharp sting across her bare feet and thought she'd been bitten by a snake.

Kaz withdrew her feet to the bed and looked down puzzled at the cuts. A muffled sound emanated from underneath her bed and she diverted her mind instantly on that of what her professor had told her and the others.

"Oh shit! Oh Shit!" She harped while scrambling up toward the headboard of her bed. "Help me." She yelled. "Help me! Fucking help me!" She cursed at herself for disbelieving in the legend and fought her mind for

a way out. Her mind searched for the solution, while her eyes bored holes at her bedroom door. “I can make it. I can!” Convincing herself that she could leap from her bed and run out of her room.

She got onto her knees and crawled across her bed to the far edge and before she had a chance to get into a stand two bony grey hands with talons as long as steak knives grabbed at her. She squealed and flail her arms down trying to smash the monster’s hands away.

Kaz thrashed and yelled, “Fuck!” when the thing pulled her off the bed at an alarming rate of speed and strength. She felt her back graze the base of the bed and her body bend unnaturally like how she might have done a gymnastic move at the age of seven.

Her back was pressed hard against the base and her legs were pulled backward under her butt flipping her over so fast she bashed her jaw on the floor. She was now flat on her stomach with her legs vanishing underneath her bed. Her arms reached forward, and her own nails dug deep into the carpet as she tried to pull herself forward. Tears rushed from her bloodshot eyes and felt like acid as they saturated her face. She could feel tension in her legs, simultaneous pulling and cutting. Her consciousness ebbed as she felt herself floating back and forth with excruciating pain that shot up her legs and reached her back. Unsure of what it was and unable to turn to look she lay there momentarily giving up.

In her unconscious state she heard music and saw herself dancing with an audience cheering her on. She turned and saw camera’s following her every move. Before she could finish a twirl she was back in her room feeling the bones in her legs being crushed with what felt like a powerful vice. She felt the creature’s hands on either side of her legs and then the unbearable squeezing that it did, applying so much pressure that not only could she feel her bones being obliterated but she could hear them. One by one. Snapping and cracking like distant angry thunder. She felt a heat flush her entire body that increasingly made her feel dizzy and weak. Her mouth opened, and she screamed until her mouth dried like glue.

She could feel a rough long tongue lapping across the length of cuts up her legs. It was fast and for a split second Kaz believed it had multiple tongues. She felt many teeth gnashing along the torn skin across her thighs, the warmth increased into an intense heat with a sticky wetness that smothered her calves. It was then she knew it was sucking out her bones. The pressure and pulling jolted her like a thousand angry fire ants. Her

body naturally pulled forward, but the mouth of the demon had her pinned with its serrated teeth while its jaw worked frantically suckling up her dusted bones.

Her heart darted in a quick pitter-patter before it slowed down. The demon's hands reached across her bottom and then squeezed until the bones in her ass dissolved into a powder and before it sliced open a section to draw her bones through. Like a thick milkshake, it targeted her tailbone and then her spine. Kaz willed death but death was not swift. Instead she was witness to her own body being pulverized and rendered into small, disconnected fragments. She'd gone into deep shock and felt little to no pain though her ears heard everything, regardless she was grateful to not see the creature devouring her.

Kaz's body reacted to the unforgiving cutting across her lower back by attempting to do a football kick. She desperately wanted to kick the monster in the face and run out of her room and into the safe arms of the police. But her legs didn't move more than three inches and to her it was as though she was dragging thick hollow tire tubes. However, it was the sound they made on the carpet that caused her to pass out again. A scraping mixed with rubber elastic echoed deeply from beneath the bed.

Kaz came to when she felt her body being pulled further under the bed. The creature had her right up to the middle of her back and she burst into tears drenching her face. Her hands dug deeply into the carpet pulling up fibers as she desperately tried to pull against the beast's hold. Her mind visualized the space underneath the bed and she wailed harder. The tiny eight-inch space was nowhere near enough room for her body to fit. It was that realization that her body was being squished like a car crusher demolishes a discarded vehicle.

Her arms shot outward when the demon applied what felt like hydraulic arms to her hips and squeezed until the bones shattered and were grounded into dust size particles. The knife like cutting of her skin burned a pain so deep Kaz felt it in her teeth. When it buried its grotesque face and inhaled her bones through the cuts, she passed out again. This time she didn't wake up.

The beast decimated her remaining bones and dragged her limp skin under the bed. When he finished with her bones, he took great pleasure in mutilating her skin into tiny pieces where he left them scattered under the bed for his snacking.

At the end of the week he went back into hiding.

He only surfaced when he was awakened by four new fresh humans to devour.

The End

Trick Or Treat

Blind Date

“Jasmine, you’re coming to the pre-Halloween costume party?” Billy asked enthusiastically.

“I don’t know. I have a story that I have to finish for Patricia. We all know how anal she gets if you are late, even one minute passed the deadline.” Jasmine looked toward her office door, satisfied that Patricia couldn’t hear her she let out a sigh of relief and looked at Billy’s goofy smile.

“Which story?” Billy questioned, while he played with two blue pens. He tossed them from one hand to the other in a juggling kind of way. He put them down and made his way to Jasmine’s desk.

“The tycoon Matt Oswald, you know the embezzling one.”

“Oh, that one. I thought you completed that. Oh well, you still need to take a break. Come on it’ll be fun.” Billy sat on top of Jasmine’s desk and leaned in with a daffy smile and begging eyes. He put his hands on either side of her face and toyed with her cheeks playfully waiting for an answer.

“Gee you are so damned persistent. When is this party?”

“Tonight.”

“Shit, tonight? Why are you only telling me about this now?”

“I told you weeks ago. You even marked it on your calendar... look.” Billy took great pride in flipping her desk calendar back a few weeks, and there it was with a bright red circle around todays date, with the word party written in black ink next to it.

“You see that right? That is your handwriting.” He chided with her playfully. His kooky smile only intensified.

“I don’t even have a costume, Billy.”

“Yes, you do. Wear the one from last year’s office party.” Billy ruffled up Jasmine’s shoulder length brown hair before getting off her desk. “Come on Jasmine it is a 50’s theme. All your favorite music will be playing. You have the perfect costume, that Grease one.” He giggled while sliding off her desk. He knuckled her desk with some repetitive beat then turned to leave. Before leaving her office, he spun on his heels and mimicked Grease Lighting dance moves. “I’ll pick you up at 8:00,” he sang and before Jasmine could answer he was gone.

Jasmine found herself gawking at her closed door and back to her unfinished article. She rose her shoulders up high while inhaling deeply, then exhaled and began her work. But her mind was on the party. Two hours had passed, and she finally finished the article, she sent it to Patricia's email and left her office.

At home she feed her cat Stormy who greeted her hungrily at the front door with a set of annoying meows. After petting her precious tabby, she retreated to her bedroom and pulled out her Olivia Newton-John, Sandy's costume, laid it on the bed and just stared at it. It bothered her that she wasn't in the mood to go out. She'd rather stay in and play Dungeons and Dragons. She looked at her side table and noted the time 7:15 p.m. She rolled her eyes and laughed out loud to herself as she showered and got ready.

Eight on the dot Billy was pounding on her door, and singing Jail House Rock. When Jasmine opened the door, she saw Elvis and smiled.

"Only you can pull that look off," she snickered as he escorted her to his Cadillac.

"When did you get the caddy?"

"I rented it. Get in we're gonna have a rock-n-roll time of it."

"Who's hosting the party?"

"Marlo Weleda from the Metropolitan Mirror..."

"Jesus fucking Christ. Billy! That is Patricia's rival. I know exactly who Marlo is. The scum stole some of my own stories. Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"Because that is the reaction you'd have given. You'd never have agreed to go. I wanted... no... I need you there with me."

"Why do you need me?"

"Well shit, Jasmine, don't drag it out of me. I can't say. I promised. Just trust me okay. You do trust me, right? Jasmine, please don't give me the silent treatment. Open the glovebox. There is a little something in it for you."

Without saying anything Jasmine opened the glovebox and pulled out a silver flask, unscrewed the top and sniffed it. Vodka and lemonade. A smile formed as she took a sip, then another sip until she'd finished half the flask off.

"Feel better now?"

Jasmine formed a fist and lightly thumped Billy's thigh. Then she laughed and hit him again.

"Thank you, thank you very much." Billy put on his Elvis impersonation making Jasmine laugh more. Before she knew it they had arrived. Billy parked his rental and led Jasmine inside, taking the elevator up to the top floor to Marlo's apartment. It was the biggest in the building, comprising of three double bedrooms, and an entertainment area big enough to house two hundred guests. They were greeted at the door by one of the staff that Marlo had hired for the occasion. The staff member was dressed as Captain Kangaroo and looked everything like him. Billy gave the room a quick scan. He quickly spied Jacob and standing next to him was a man dressed in a demon costume. Billy grabbed a tight hold of Jasmine's hand and pushed his way through the crowd.

"Jacob," called out Billy.

"Billy... Jasmine... meet my friend, Tony."

Billy shoved Jasmine toward Tony a little too forcefully and she bumped into him knocking his drink out of his hand. She immediately turned bright red and swiveled quickly on her heels to face Billy. She glared at him hard when unexpectedly a hand rested on her shoulder and she turned to face Tony.

"Nice to meet you Jasmine," came a very deep voice. His smile was big, and he had a very prominent cleft chin reminding her of Ben Affleck and she instantly found herself swooning a little at the uncanny resemblance. Even his eyes, nose shape and the style of his dark hair reminded her of the star.

"I'm sorry about your drink. You can blame Billy for pushing me too hard." Jasmine unclenched her teeth and would have words with Billy and Jacob for setting her up.

"I'm not worried. It missed me completely and besides the drinks are all free here. Let me get you one?"

"Sure, I'll take a vodka and juice or a rum and coke, please."

Jasmine watched Tony head for the bar and then she turned to scowl at Billy, but he wasn't there. Neither was Jacob. She looked for them but couldn't see either of them. Jacob was wearing a vampire costume and there were at least ten others dressed the same, along with the 12 other Elvis'. Making it impossible to tell who was who. She turned around in time to see

Tony coming back. She took her drink with a smile and they stood for a while chatting.

"I guess you didn't know you were meeting me?"

"No, I'm sorry, I'm just not used to being blindsided like this. If I knew I was being set up on a blind date, I'd have prepared myself better."

"How so? You look stunning."

"Easy for you to say."

"Not much on compliments, are you?"

"Not really."

Jasmine studied Tony. He was wearing a demon's costume, and it was hard to gage what he really looked like. What she could see she liked. Tony got her a third drink and they stood chatting and listening to the music, until the music increased in volume making talking extremely difficult. It had become so loud that it made her skin tingle. The bass thumped in time with her heartbeat as though they were one, filling her from head to toe with music. She loved the song currently on and started to jiggle to the beat.

Over the roar of music, a distant hazy chatter could be heard. She kept eye contact with Tony who seemed intent on watching her in a mysteriously awkward way. She assumed it was just the lighting and carried on swaying to the music. Tony grabbed hold of her hand and took her to the dance floor. She had no choice but to join the crowd, jumping and swinging their hips while being huddled like sardines in tin cans.

"I'll be back in a minute," Tony said as he slipped away from her.

Jasmine stayed on the dance floor engrossed in another favorite song and danced her heart out. After half an hour Tony returned with no explanation of where he'd been. Jasmine didn't feel it her business to quiz him but decided to leave the party after agreeing to go out with him on a second date. She gave him her cell phone number and caught a cab home.

The Alley

“Quickly in here... No one will see us,” Richard said while pulling Lisa with him into the alley behind Marlo’s apartment. He took her around the waist and kissed her sloppily as he pulled her further down the darkened alley.

“Really behind this dumpster? You sure know how to woe a lady don’t ya, dick?” Lisa said in between wet kisses.

“It is better than nothing.” Richard quickly undone his belt buckle and unzipped his jeans.

“Dick, oh yes, yes, yes,” Lisa cried as Richard fondled her breasts at the same time pinning her against the brick wall. The roughness of the wall grazed Lisa’s back, but she was so drunk that her body wasn’t feeling the sharp scratches. Her eyes automatically shut when Richard pressed up against her, sticking his tongue down her throat and saturating her face with his saliva. With one hand he pulled out his cock and with his other he tugged at her panties, roughly pulling them down. Lisa arched herself into him hungry for his hot member, tugging on his jeans so they fell around his ankles fully exposing his swollen cock. Neither of them were coordinated, and each time Richard attempted to get his rod to enter her, she’d move and it would go to the side.

“Stay still, I can’t get it in.”

Lisa reached forward and put her arms around Richard’s back, and he pinned her up against the wall thrusting harder with his body into hers. That time he got it in. With a releasing of air came a heated squeal from Lisa’s parted mouth. She quickly moved her hands up Richard’s back and pulled on the back of his hair. She buried her face into the crook of his neck and nibbled on his neck and hungrily moved up toward his ear.

Lisa blinked open her eyes and pulled away from Richard’s neck looking at his face. His expression excited her. He had his eyes wide open, his pupils were fixed and dilated. His lips were open as if he were about to scream and his body jerked into hers roughly.

“Oh, dear God! Richard... Did you just pee on me?”

Lisa pushed Richard back far enough to look down. When she saw the dark fluid, she got angry.

“You dirty fucking bastard. You just pissed all over me. Get the fuck off me. I said get the fuck off me,” she growled shoving him as hard as she could until he fell backward. He didn’t fall on his ass, instead he fell straight backward like a plank of wood. Lisa heard his head meet the ground and grossly watched it rebound like a rubber ball before it rested on the asphalt. Where he remained deathly still.

It was then she noticed the dark fluid wasn’t urine but blood. She quickly put her hands to her pussy and checked, thinking she’d gotten her period and caused Richard to freak out and faint. When she looked at her hands they were covered in gore, but it wasn’t hers she was certain of it. She felt nothing inside of her to indicate that it had come from her. The claret liquid was on the outside of her, covering her legs too. Dripping down to the ground. Sticky and warm. Lisa quickly grabbed her cell phone and switched the flashlight on shinning the light directly on Richard and she instantly gasped loudly.

There was no time to think. No time to flee. Even the passage of time slowed and the surrounding sounds from the party above became as if she was now underwater. Aside from her adrenaline pumping her heart beat, her muscles refused to move. That pounding inside beating a rhythm to the words of her execution as the cold steel blade was being dragged across her throat. Her eyes caught a burst of crimson spraying outward before gushing to the ground. Her face, so beautiful in life was now frozen, with wide open eyes, and slack mouth. She crumbled downward and sank into a pool of her own blood. In a split second her eyes met that of her attacker and in those fractions of a few seconds she was there and then gone.

Their bodies lay like ghoulish mannequins; Richard’s stomach exposed to the world with his intestines on offer for the taking, Lisa’s esophagus and arteries stuck out like bloated rubber tubing. Their blood thickening but not yet dried on their waxy skin.

Roughly and quickly the killer removed Richard and Lisa’s pinky fingers and tucked them into his jeans pocket, he then picked up the bodies one at a time, and put them inside the blue dumpster. He removed the clear plastic rain poncho he had on and dumped that into the trash along with the gloves he was wearing. He then casually walked away smiling.

Halloween Night

Jarrod watched his wife take their two kids out for trick-or-treating. He stood on the front step waving them goodbye with a gleam of sadness. He had promised to go with them but had come down with a severe migraine. He watched the other children darting between the hoods of cold cars, running in full costume from house to house hungry for piles of candy. A half smile etched across his pain-stricken face as he stood a few moments longer watching.

The night was perfect for Halloween, with only a weak moon to offer a glimpse of light giving it an eerie feeling. Just before he turned to go inside he noticed his five-year-old rushing back toward the house. Painfully, he walked toward his son.

"What's wrong little man?"

"The ghost daddy. That one. Look over there!" Paul cried out with total terror.

"Paul what are you wearing?" Jarrod asked sweetly and calmly. He watched his son look up and down at himself.

"I'm a ghost. OH! I am a ghost. Is that one like me daddy? Is he a dressed-up ghost too?"

"Yes, son he is. Now go with mommy and get as much candy as you can."

Jarrod leaned down and kissed his son on both cheeks and watched him rush off to Carol, who was waiting patiently with his seven-year-old sister, Pauline. Carol waved at Jarrod and he waved back, turning to face the house, he scrunched up his face in pain as the migraine pounded harder with each step he took. He went inside, grabbed the big bucket of candy and left it on his front doorstep. He knew he'd not be opening the door to any trick-or-treaters that night. He took himself to his kitchen and poured a half glass of water and took two Advil. He then retreated to the lounge and with the lights out he sat in his rocker and closed his eyes, willing the migraine away.

Jarrod opened his eyes to a rustling shuffle noise. He looked around the dark living room and waited for the sound to happen again. When it didn't, he thought it was just kids taking candy from the bucket he'd left outside. So, he closed his eyes again. Within a second of closing them the same

sound alerted him and he bolted up right. He didn't want to turn the lights on, knowing what that would do to his migraine so he walked to the living room windows and pulled open the drapes. A little light filtered through, enough so he could see a tall figure standing in the doorway of his living room.

"Who the fuck are you?" Jarrod sternly asked as he approached the stranger. "Well?" Jarrod willed his migraine away futilely as he raised his fists at the man wearing a demon's mask. The latex mask at first seemed so real and Jarrod had to look hard to ensure it was really a mask. It had huge horns, a mouth full of jagged teeth, and a twisted face with eyes so dark it was like looking into black holes. Jarrod urged the man again to leave. But the stranger just stood like a frozen statue confusing Jarrod. "What the fuck do you want. Are you high?" Jarrod blurted, but the stranger didn't answer, instead he glared more intently at him like a vicious predatory wolf.

"Get the fuck out." Jarrod gruffed. He grabbed the man's arm and started to usher him toward the front door, believing he was finally leaving. With steady heavy footsteps the demon mask wearing man turned sharply without so much as a warning and took out a ten-inch butcher's knife. Jarrod flinched and automatically jumped backward. Catching his heels on the sofa falling into it and stumbling to get up, but he wasn't quick enough.

Every muscle on Jarrod's face tightens, his eyes squint, his chin juts outward as he struggles under the grip of the man's gloved hand. Watching the knife closing in, Jarrod hooked a punch into the side of the man's face. It was like he had just hit a brick wall. His fisted hand ached something fierce, and with determination he hit him again. But it was like the man behind the mask was taunting him. Waving the knife in front of Jarrod's petrified eyes. Without warning the knife was jammed into Jarrod's throat at a jaunty angle. Jarrod's eyes filled, and a flash of his children darted across his vision, then his wife Carol.

Jarrod slumps his weight into the sofa sucking in oxygen harder and faster and takes a hold of the man's arm trying to stop him. It was impossible, the man was so much stronger. Jarrod couldn't stop him. Wide-eyed, he tried again, but it was too late. The knife penetrated deeply and Jarrod's mouth filled with blood. It spilled out and dribbled down his chin. The man pulled out the knife swiftly and waved it in front of Jarrod's shocked orbits before he lowered it blood soaked and sliced neatly across Jarrod's throat. Gore gushed out and spilled down behind Jarrod's ears

soaking the sofa. Jarrod's knees involuntarily jolted up and kicked out before twitching and then finally nothing but stillness like a photograph of a starless night sky. Jarrod's body moved no more. The killer took Jarrod's pinky finger and walked out of the house smiling. On his way out, he helped himself to a handful of the candy and scanned the area for his next victim.

He spied an old lady sitting on a porch several houses from Jarrod's and instantly a stir in his gut reminded him of how poorly his grandmother treated him. A group of kids wondered up the path toward the old lady and while she's telling them of her day he snuck inside her house, unseen.

He didn't have to wait long. The old woman returned inside to get more candy. She ambled off to the kitchen and grabbed another bag. She emptied it into a pumpkin shaped basket and promptly put the empty bag into the trash can in the laundry. Her mind was cluttered with thoughts of her late husband Egbert. Forgetting about the candy she started toward the front door when Oscar jumped out and startled her. "Oh, you silly kitty," she snapped." Ignoring the cat, she continued toward her front door until she realized she'd left the pumpkin basket back in the kitchen. Rubbing at her head she turned and when she did she came face to face with the demon mask wearing killer. He stood there towering over her and she giggled loudly.

"How many times have I told you Lou, you can't scare me, no matter how many Halloweens you try. You'll never scare me." She laughed harder as she walked right past him and entered her kitchen.

"I can put a pot of tea on for you. Where is Katie and the kids?" She called out as she got two cups down from a cupboard above the oven. "I have banana slice for you too." Happily, she called out while fetching the cake from the fridge. When she closed the fridge door, she dropped the cake and let out a frightful cry.

"You... You... You aren't my grandson, Lou." Quivering like a withering rose, she backed herself up and away from the man waving a bloodstained knife at her. She had only made it into the hallway toward the front door when she felt him close enough to be grabbed.

"Get away from me or I'll-I'll-I'll call the police." She quavered while quickly fumbling inside of her apron pocket for her cell phone. She didn't get the chance to dial as it was slapped out her hands quicker than she'd

have swatted a fly in her youth. Tears streamed down her face catching within her deep pitted wrinkles around the corner of her mouth.

“What do you want? Money? Jewelry? I have both. Help yourself. Just don’t hurt me... please don’t hurt me!” The old woman looked at her assailant with watery eyes as she felt the blood pour from the side of her neck. She looked down long enough to see the carpet turning red.

Her eyes travelled the girth of the man in front of her. He was muscular, and without his mask on she could see his features. Though they were of no help to her now. He reached forward with a single skilled movement and sliced her throat wide open. The folds of her aging skin hung downward like layers and layers of puff pastry. Before falling she held a blood-soaked hand across the wall in a feeble attempt to stop herself from falling forward. But as her life ebbed away and the darkness sheathed her she fell smearing her hand down the wall and leaving an uneven pattern of inky red.

With a malevolent smile he took her pinky finger, put on the mask and let himself out, on the prowl for his next victim.

Thirteen houses from the old woman’s he watched a middle age woman handing out candy before she went back inside. A few minutes later another group of kids were happily pounding on her door, yelling out trick-or-treat. The woman opened her door quickly and held up a skeleton that made spooky ghost sounds. The younger child in the group run off screaming, three others yelled before they realized it wasn’t really a ghost and held out their hands giggling. The woman laughed as she handed them lavish helpings of candy. When those kids rushed to the next house the killer casually walked up to the woman’s house and pushed the doorbell.

Linda did the same trick, held out the skeleton out front and while it made its ghostly garish sounds the killer pushed Linda back inside and kicked the door closed. He quickly secured Linda by twisting her arm around her back and using his free hand to lock her front door. He then put that hand over her mouth to stop her from screaming. He stood perfectly still, listening. Making sure she was alone. After a couple of minutes, he was satisfied that she was and so he dragged her through the entrance way and led her to her own living room.

“Scream and I’ll cut you in places that will keep you alive long enough to watch yourself bleed to death,” he said harshly with a deep voice that chilled her to the bone.

Linda thought about screaming, thought about making a run for the door, thought about escaping upstairs but neither scenario played out right in her head. She was doomed the moment she opened her door. She could see it in the eyes of the man standing a hair's breath from her. She could smell his expensive cologne and see his freshly shaved face. Without that demon mask she could see his cleft chin and when her eyes met his she could only see evil. The kind of evil that bores through you taking your soul and feeding it to hungry monsters.

"What do you want?" She whimpered.

When he didn't answer her, she figured she was going to die whether or not she stayed put like an obedient student at karate or if she tried to escape. Her adrenaline kicked in, flight or fight took her by surprise as she found her feet and made a rush for her front door. He stood there watching for a moment, laughing at her attempt. She hadn't gotten within two feet of her front door when he grabbed a handful of her long dark blonde hair. He yanked so hard and fast that she fell backward. She lay on her back terrified as she looked up into the crazed eyes of the man that now straddled across her like a towering beast. Her eyes caught sight of the large butcher's knife and immediately her heart raced when another group of trick-o-treaters pounded on her door. The man knelt down and quickly covered her mouth. She had no time to release the scream as it locked up at the back of her throat. All that escaped through her closed lips was a silent hiss of air.

Linda breathed hard through the small gap of her unblocked nostrils and could only taste the leather off the thick glove smothering her mouth and part of her nose. She shook her head from side to side, desperately trying to get him to release the pressure he had on her, so she could breathe. After a few more moments the kids shouted out 'trick' then footsteps could be heard leaving. Out of nowhere eggs and toilet paper were being hurled at the windows and at the front door. In the background the kids were screaming out in fits of laughter and taunting swearwords. Linda couldn't be happier, to hear that distraction, she hoped for a moment the stranger would run off. But he didn't. He sat on top of her and waited for the kids to leave.

When they finally did, he looked at her face watching the liquid bunch up on her lower eyelids as he took his knife and sliced it quickly across her throat. He remained sitting on her, just to watch the blood drain to the sides and form a pool underneath her head. He let out a gloating laugh before

chopping off her pinky finger. He stood up, wiped the blade on the woman's clothing, sheathed it and put the mask back on. Waited a few minutes before slipping unnoticed out the back.

He thought about last Halloween, and the challenge he made for himself. He had killed 15 last Halloween and he wanted to double that this time around. Now in a new city he had already started the ball rolling. The night was young, and he had many streets to find more unsuspecting victims.

When he finished he tallied up the fingers, sitting on his living room floor with the digits spreading wide and far before him. Thirty-three fingers in total. He was ecstatic with himself. He not only doubled his figure but had exceeded it by three more. He gathered the fingers up and put them into an ice cream container and then placed that into his freezer. Once it was all done he showered and got ready for his date, it would mark his second.

The Discovery

Jasmine changed into her pajamas believing Tony was a no show. She walked around her bedroom cursing Billy when a knock at the door startled her. Fuming for having wasted a perfectly good Halloween night she stomped to the door, assuming it was late night trick-or-treaters. Without opening the door, she raised her voice and spoke through it.

"There is no more candy, I'm sorry." She started to walk away, but the knock persisted and someone rattled the door knob. Jasmine put the chain on the door and opened it. She peered out and saw Tony standing with his back to the door. She removed the chain and opened it but stood in the frame with her hands on her hips.

"I'm sorry for being two hours late," Tony apologized with a warm smile.

"I figured you stood me up. So why then... I mean why show up now?"

"To apologize of course. Come on Jazz the night is still young. We can go anywhere you like. Let me make it up to you." Tony's smile grew wider and his eyes gleamed a sparkle that Jasmine couldn't say no to. As much as her head was refusing to go, a part of her heart melted with his charm.

"First explain why you are so late?"

"My grandmother had a fall. I'm the only living relative left, so the hospital called me. I rushed over and made sure she was okay. I stupidly left my phone at home and didn't think to use the hospitals to let you know I was going to be late."

"Is your grandmother okay?"

"She is. She will stay overnight though. She hit the back of her head and they want to make sure she doesn't have a concussion."

"Okay, I'll go with you. Let me get changed first. Come on in. You can wait in the living room."

Jasmine rushed off to her room and closed the door. She sat on the edge of her bed thinking. Then got up and quickly changed into a pair of jeans and a white sweater. She put on some lipstick and left her room. Jasmine found Tony stroking her cat Stormy and it made her smile, more so because her cat never warmed up to anyone... ever! Convincing her if Stormy trusted him then she should too.

"Tony, do you mind if we make a stop on the way?"

“Sure, where to?”

“I want to check on my grandmother.” Jasmine smiled, as she grabbed her keys and headed for the door.

Tony gave Stormy another pat before he followed Jasmine out the door.

“Won’t your grandmother be sleeping by now? It is after 11:00.”

Jasmine looked at her wristwatch. “Crap! You are right. It is too late. I’ll swing by in the morning on my way to work.”

“Well then, do you have a particular bar, club or place you want to go?” Tony asked while holding the car door open for her.

“Hmm how about we go the ‘Atomic Bar and Grill’?”

“Perfect choice.”

The bar was packed. It reminded Jasmine of Comic-Con with the amount of people in costumes. The crowd had a life of their own, with vibrant clothing that glittered and glowed in the LED lighting. Watching from a corner of the room she scanned around, her eyes darting from person to person. They all seemed to be moving like enchanting shoals of fish. Chatter was loud and the music even louder. Tony had already downed three of The Gravedigger’s drinks, while Jasmine was still on her first Peach Candy Corn Cocktail.

Around midnight the bar exceeded in capacity and Jasmine found it fascinating to watch the varying different men and women who she felt all looked older than what they were. Slumped on bar stools, glasses half empty, an argument in one corner, while a drunk danced by himself on a table top in another area of the bar. Couples embracing, laughing and kissing. She noticed Tony looking at her own lips a few times. Jasmine had downed several more cocktails and was feeling warm. She found her hand wandering to touch Tony constantly.

Tony slipped his right arm around Jasmine’s waist and pulled her in for a kiss. Both of them closed their eyes. His kiss was slow and soft, comforting and sexy. She had to force herself to pull away and take a moment to let him know she wasn’t that kind of girl. He understood or appeared to from her perspective and was very gentlemanly about it all. He reached his hand down toward the table and grabbed his glass downing the last of his drink, then led Jasmine out of the bar and took her home.

On her door step he pulled her into him, his right hand drifted to her hip. It settled there, and he pulled her in closer. Jasmine inhaled deeply. She was against his warm chest, chiseled to perfection. Her immediate thought was,

‘did he have to be built so perfectly?’ She splayed her hand across his chest, intending to push him away, but instead she pulled him in closer and they kissed hard and passionately. It felt so natural like she’d been dating him for months. Tony began nuzzling her neck with sprinkles of kisses, so delicate, they were like whispers. She urged herself to push away and for a few more minutes she couldn’t.

Her body felt alive, tingling from head to toe and she knew at that moment that if she didn’t pull away she wasn’t going to. Tony didn’t protest with anything verbal, but the hunger in his eyes told a different story. He pouted his lips and went to kiss her again, but Jasmine put the key into her door and slipped through.

“Goodnight Tony.” It was all she could say and without looking she closed the door. She stood with her back pressed against the door and listened for his footsteps. When she heard them, she breathed out loudly and hugged herself. For a few moments she lingered by the door and then took herself to bed.

When she woke the next morning, she took one look at herself in the bathroom mirror and couldn’t believe she’d gone to bed without showering and removing her makeup, which was now streaked down her face. “Oh, great. I’ll have mascara on my pillow.” Jasmine stripped her bedding and tossed it into the hamper along with her clothes. After her shower she dressed in a pair of dark jeans and a dark blue sweater and headed over to her grandmother’s house.

After knocking and ringing the doorbell at her Grandmother Joan’s and not getting an answer she took a walk around the back of the house where she knew a spare key was hidden. She fished it out from under a rock hidden in a hedge. The back door took her to the kitchen. The first thing that caught her attention was the meowing cat.

“Oscar what’s up? Is nanna still sleeping?” Jasmine fetched some cat food from the cupboard and deposited it into the cat’s bowl. She put a pot of coffee on with full intentions of fixing Grandma Joan a nice hot cup. It wasn’t until she left the kitchen that she saw her grandmother’s legs laying on a red stained carpet. Rushing to her, Jasmine knelt down and fixated on her throat. A scream bubbled inside of her for what felt like an eternity before it rose and escaped her shocked mouth.

Joan’s body lay like a ghoulish cadaver, with her throat sliced wide open. Jasmine could see her arteries and veins sticking out like chenille

stems.

"Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! Why Nanna? why?" Jasmine pulled herself together as much as she could and used her cell phone to call the authorities. She knew better than to touch the body and/or the surrounding area. She carefully leaned down lower and kissed her grandmother's head, then backed herself out of the way. Standing a few feet and unable to take her eyes off her grandmother's body she let the tears fall. Her phone buzzed. Seeing Billy's name, she quickly answered it.

"She's dead."

"Who?"

"She's been murdered, Billy. Someone murdered my grandmother."

"Where are you?"

"At grandma's." Jasmine snorted up the excess mucus and rubbed at her eyes with her left hand.

"I'm on my way." Billy hang up without waiting on a reply.

Jasmine put her phone back into her pocket and swayed like a flag in the wind as she unavoidably looked at her dead grandmother. Through a tearful choke she asked out loud, "Who the fuck would kill an old woman?"

Jasmine scrunched up her face as she looked past her grandmother's body and starred at the front door. It wasn't broken, it wasn't open, and she remembered not five minutes earlier knocking on it. It was intact. Nothing out of the ordinary. She backed up into the kitchen where she'd entered and looked over that door, it too was not forced. So, the killer didn't break in. *Oh my God. I wonder if that means she knew who the killer was and invited him in*. Jasmine couldn't believe she missed it the first time, the spilled banana cake on the floor to the side. She looked closer at it, the plate hadn't broken. *How did I miss this?* She wondered around the kitchen and noticed two cups and the tea pot ready to be put on. *Someone she knew. It had to be someone she knew.*

Jasmine's thoughts were broken when the police arrived followed by the coroner. She let them in and while she was in the middle of answering all of the many questions they had for her, Billy arrived. She embraced him in a long tight hug. Her tears streamed and she sobbed heavily into his embrace.

"Jazz, what happened?"

Jasmine pulled away and smeared the back of her arm across her face to dry her eyes. Billy handed her a tissue that he'd fetched from the kitchen and waited for her to compose herself.

“Someone killed granny. I think she knew them Billy. There was no break in at all. She must have known who it was. But I can’t think of anyone that would harm her. She was loved by everyone. This is just so messed up.”

Billy was shoved aside unexpectedly when Tony came through and immediately went to Jasmine. Wrapping his arms around her waist, pulling her in for a secure hug, he tried to comfort her. She looked briefly at him before her bloodshot eyes met Billy’s.

Billy waved his phone at her, indicating he’d text Tony. All she could do was shake her head in a why- the-blazers-did-you-do-that question.

Billy felt awkward while he waited for them to finish hugging. He wasn’t sure if he’d done the right thing by texting the address to Tony. Maybe Jasmine didn’t want him to see her this way. After all, they only just met. Billy was kicking himself the more he thought about it.

“You didn’t have to come.”

“When Billy text me what happened, I dropped everything and came straight over. So yes, I had to be here. I’d want you to do this for me if it were the other way around,” Tony said, as he directed Jasmine to the living room.

The place was buzzing with police. McKenzie, the chief of police, made his way over to Jasmine. Both Tony and Billy sat on the sofa with Jasmine in the middle as they both held her hands.

McKenzie was the kind of man who’d been born in a suit. He was a pensive man with his right hand always on his gun holster. With a ubiquitously round face and square shoulders, that stuck out like a wrestlers, causing one to take a second or third look. His voice was strong, a baritone of clipped legalistic words. Standing only five-five he never looked more out of place than he did at that very moment. Everything was black and white for Ben McKenzie, no shades of grey at all. Always by the book, not once exceeding the rules. He pulled the coffee table to the middle and sat on it facing Jasmine. His expression was unreadable and the rumors of him being the towns best poker player just rang true for her.

“Run it through again for me Miss Dawn?” When he spoke, he jutted his chin forward and his eyes enlarged. Billy could have sworn that he saw McKenzie’s ears twitching like some kind of insect.

Jasmine ran through everything and Tony collaborated her story with his verbal testament that she was with him for most of the night, not arriving

home until nearly 2:00 am.

McKenzie asked a few more questions then handed Jasmine his police card. He got up and pushed the coffee table back. “My condolences to you, Miss Dawn,” He said as he made his way out.

“Shit!” Jasmine said, standing sharply from the couch. She dug her phone out of her jeans pocket and searched through her contacts.

“What’s wrong?” Tony cooed gently.

“I have to let Lou and Katie know.”

“Who are they?” Tony aimed his question at Billy while Jasmine spoke on her phone.

“Lou is Joan’s grandson.”

“But, what? Jasmine said she was an only child?”

“She is. Lou is more of her honorary grandson acquired through Joan’s lifetime friend Jane. The two of them grew up together and when Jane had a son, she asked Joan to be his grandmother.”

“I see. And does Jasmine get along with Lou?”

“They don’t have much to do with each other. He’s considerably older of course.”

“I see.” Tony stood patiently waiting for Jasmine to finish her call. When she did, he offered to take her back to her house. She accepted and said her goodbyes to Billy.

“I’ll bring you over some dinner tonight,” Billy offered as he left.

The ride over was silent, other than Jasmine snorting up excessive snot that seemed like an endless tap. When they arrived at her house, she got out of Tony’s car and walked to her front door to let herself in. “Make yourself a cup of coffee or tea, Tony. I will just be a few minutes. I have to phone work and let them know I won’t be coming in for a few days. There is the funeral to arrange and the emptying of Granny’s house and...”

“Don’t worry about any of that stuff. Go make your call. I’ll make us some coffee and you can just lay on the couch and watch movies with me. Unless you want to be alone?”

“No. I’m happy to laze around with you. Give me a few extra minutes I’m going to change into my pajamas. A day of movies sounds pretty darn good. Thanks.” Jasmine walked off with a half-smile.

Tony found the items he needed to make him and Jazz a cup of coffee. He also found microwave popcorn. Setting that on the table momentarily when Stormy started to meow at his feet. She would circle him then jump

up digging her nails into his shin. He kicked out gently at first, but the cat was persistent. He didn't know what she wanted. All he felt was pure annoyance. Taking a glance around the area, making sure Jasmine was not around, he swiftly picked up the cat by the scruff of her neck and with momentous speed he snapped Stormy's neck. With the cat silenced, Tony roughly held it in his hand as he searched around for a place to dump it. He walked into the living area and after a good look around, he decided that behind the sofa would do. He leaned into the sofa and reached over dropping the cat. He heard it hit the carpeted floor, and it reminded him of a book being dropped. He got back up and strode off to the kitchen to finish making the coffee. Smugly, he took them into the living room, placed them on the coffee table and sat down waiting for Jasmine.

"Did you find a movie?" Jasmine asked as she flopped herself onto the sofa.

"No. I didn't know where you kept them?"

"In the cabinet under the TV. Go on, you choose. I'm not really up to it. And to be honest I don't know how long I'm going to last due to my mind travelling to my Grandma's house. All I can see is her hacked throat."

"We can just sit here and say nothing if you'd prefer?"

"No, I need sound, a distraction or I'm going to lose it. Just put anything on. Stormy... here kitty, kitty. Stormy!"

"I let the cat outside if that is who you are calling?"

"Oh... Okay. Did she want to go out?"

"Well she was meowing, so I guess so. Doesn't she usually go out?" Tony had moved off the sofa and was speaking to Jasmine from the cabinet under the television.

"Not normally, she has a kitty litter box to use so I'm surprised that she wanted out. It could just be you. She isn't used to you yet."

"She'll come back. How does *Girls just wanna have fun*, sound to you?"

"Yeah, she'll come back when she's hungry, and yes, that movie is great. Are you sure you can sit through a chick flick?" Jasmine almost chuckled.

"Yep, I don't mind these kinds of movies. I'd watch mud dry if it meant spending time with you."

Jasmine was instantly smitten, but part of her felt she should continue to hold up her protective walls until she'd gotten to know him better. She sat

quietly sipping her coffee and for a moment her mind was empty of thoughts. Then like a raging flash flood her mind was filled with erratic thoughts, everything from work, Billy, the loss of her grandmother, playing Dungeons and Dragons, to meeting Tony. At that moment she wished her parents were alive, a hug from her own mother was what she really needed. A frown appeared, and she humped up her shoulders before settling into the sofa with a firm push of her body. Sinking into the soft material felt good.

As much as she wanted to relax she was finding it practically impossible. Her phone kept buzzing with texts and calls. She answered it when her boss Patricia rang.

"Patricia, I already spoke to HR and arranged for a few days bereavement. Is there something urgent you need?"

"Actually... yes. First off, I am sorry about your grandmother. Second, she isn't the only one..."

"What? What do you mean not the only one?"

"There have been three others just like her, and here's the kicker they were all missing their pinky fingers from their right hands. Also, another kicker for you, their homes were not broken into, no forced entry of any kind. It seems we have a serial killer on our hands and I want you to run this story. I know that you need time to grieve. Lord knows I get that. But this is crucial, you are my top journalist. Jasmine are you still there?"

"Yes, I was just thinking about all that you said. I'll be there in the morning."

"If you would, please."

"I will. Bye Patricia." Jasmine hung up and put her phone on the coffee table. She glanced at Tony who was giving her the oddest of looks. "What is it?" she quizzed.

"Nothing!" He snapped.

Jasmine rose from the sofa. "I think you should get going. I have to go to work tomorrow. There have been more murders, just like my grandmother's."

"I didn't mean to snap at you Jazz, it is just that I hate to see you having to work when you need time to grieve. It makes no damn sense. Can't someone else handle this until you feel like returning?"

"Truthfully Tony, I don't mind going in. I love, err, loved my grandmother. It will help me."

"Help you?"

“Yes, help me by distracting me, keeping me busy. Putting the pieces together and helping the police catch this sonofabitch. I may not be a detective or a cop, but I know my stuff and I’m going to make sure this one doesn’t get away. There is a fucking serial killer in our town.”

“If you are sure. Then I will go, but just remember I’m only a phone call away.” He leaned in and gave her a kiss on her forehead. Embraced her into a tight hug and sniffed at her hair, which she found strange. She looked up, meet his eyes and pushed a finger into his cleft chin. She held it for a moment before giving him a kiss on the lips. “I’ll remember. Perhaps we can get together in a couple of days, after the funeral if that is okay with you?”

“It is, but wouldn’t you like me to attend the funeral with you?”

“No thanks. I’d like to go with Billy. I hope you understand?”

“I do. Billy is your best friend, and he knew your grandma too. So yes, I get that.”

Jasmine kissed Tony one more time and saw him out the door. She didn’t know what to feel or think. He was really charming at times and other times he seemed cold and calculating. Something she’d noticed on the few times she had been with him. Yet she couldn’t put her finger on it.

That night she lay in bed going over the past few days. “God, I hate Halloween.” She said out loud before falling to sleep.

Three Days Later

“What the hell is that smell?” Jasmine called out loud as she wondered around her living room in search of the stench that smelled like a million dead rotting rats. Something white near her sofa was moving around on the carpet. She got on her knees for a closer look. Not only was the smell deathly stronger in that area, but the thing squirming on the ground made her jump to her feet and rush off to the laundry where she grabbed nervously at the can of fly spray. “Maggots, damn fucking cat must have bought in a dead bird.” Back in her living room she coated the carpet area with fly spray. Chocking back the fumes from that, and the dead smell, she braved moving her sofa to the side so she could extract the bird. It wasn’t until she had pushed and pulled the sofa out of the way did she back up screaming.

“Stormy,” she blubbered. Tears streamed down her face streaking white marks across her freshly done makeup. “Stormy, no my baby, no!” She howled as she took out her vacuum cleaner, sucked up the crawling maggots and then put Stormy into a cardboard box. With a towel wrapped around her face she was able to inspect the cat. Noting how the cats head was floppy. “How did you break your neck?” She spoke out loud as if expecting someone to answer her.

Jasmine looked up from where the cat was and apart from the top of the sofa there wasn’t anything but the wall. “You couldn’t have busted your neck from the top of the sofa?” She closed the lid of the cardboard box and put it on top the coffee table before finishing cleaning away the maggots. Afterward she pushed the sofa back into its spot, picked up the box and put it straight into her car.

She drove to the vets and had them look over Stormy. The veterinarian confirmed the broken neck and could only suggest he’d fallen off the house roof or other such high structure and made it back home to die. Jasmine wasn’t buying it. She knew he was always an indoor cat and immediately she remembered Tony saying he’d let him out. Her mind played different scenarios over and over.

“It is your fault,” she snapped out loudly while getting into her car. She let the vet keep Stormy to have him cremated. She’d return in two days for his ashes.

Just as she turned her car on, her phone rang. She looked down seeing who it was. Before she drove out of the vet's car park she picked up her phone angrily.

"You did it. It is your fault. My cat is dead because of you."

"Whoa... hold on a second. How is that my fault?"

"You let him out and now he's dead. Somehow he broke his neck."

"I'm sorry Jasmine but please don't blame me. I understand you are going through a lot lately, but this is ridiculous. You are not yourself right now. I'll call you later." Without giving Jasmine a chance to reply he hung up. "Stupid shit, I'm done with you." She said, as she pounded the steering wheel and let more tears flow down her reddened cheeks. A part of her rationalized that he wasn't to blame. But a bigger part overruled her logical thoughts.

She relaxed with a few deep breaths, started her car up and drove straight to work. Billy was waiting for her in her office. She took one look at him and broke down. After a while Jasmine was able to compose herself enough to tell Billy about Stormy. Billy raced off and returned with a hot chocolate filled with marshmallows and sprinkles. An hour passed, and she had to make a start on the article she promised Patricia she would write. Billy left with arrangements to meet back at her place after work.

When she got home, she noticed Billy's car parked on the road. She parked her car and hurried inside grateful for the company.

Billy-3 Hours Earlier

Billy went to the florist and ordered a dozen daisies and then went to Jasmine's favorite fast food place and ordered a meal for two from Taco Bell. Back at Jasmine's he grabbed the vase from a cupboard in her kitchen and put the flowers in it, then put them on top of her dining table. He then placed the food in the fridge. He quickly picked up Stormy's food bowl, toys and litterbox and boxed everything up and labelled it before putting it in the storage cupboard in the hallway. He grabbed the vacuum and gave the house a quick clean.

He checked the time and knew he had another hour to go before Jasmine arrived from work, so he selected 'Top Gun' and sat down to watch it. Half way through a knock on the door had him pause the movie. He opened the door.

"What are you doing here?"

"I hope you don't mind, but I can't just let Jasmine be alone."

"She is not *alone*. I'm here."

"But you can go now. I'll take it from here."

"No... I'm staying. You should go." Billy held the door open for him.

But Tony had already waltzed in and made himself comfortable on the sofa. Billy was annoyed at Jacob for introducing Tony to him and having him set Jasmine up with Tony. It was all proving to be rather annoying. Tony was pushy and it irritated Billy, then the guilt waves flowed through his veins.

"Honestly Tony, I got this."

Tony stood up aggressively and walked up to Billy, his nose almost touching Billy's. Billy automatically took one step back, but Tony inched himself forward, intimidating Billy.

"Enough man. Go! I seriously have this." Billy jeered.

"I think it is you that needs to go. Jasmine is *mine!*" quipped Tony.

"Like hell! She isn't an object that you can put claim to. She is a human being. Now get the fuck out of her house before I call the cops," Billy yelled at Tony.

Tony snickered vehemently before socking a punch to Billy's cheek. Billy grabbed his cheek immediately and then throw a punch back, but Tony ducked out of the way causing Billy to just hit the air. Angrily, he tried

to hit him a few more times, but each time he whooshed his fisted hand through the air he missed.

"You're a fucking control freak," yelled Billy as he left Jasmine's place like a wounded animal. He sat in his car for a moment before ringing Jasmine. She wasn't picking up. Without thinking he got back out of his car and stormed back inside.

"Get the fuck out!"

"Back for more bashings, are you?" Tony snickered.

Billy stood there unsure of what he'd do next. He needed Tony to go. He desperately wanted to warn Jasmine about him, but there was no time to think and plan. Billy looked down at his stomach and saw the knife being pulled out. He fell to the floor and passed out. Tony didn't have enough time to finish him off when Jasmine walked through the door. She quickly raced to Billy's side and gave a fearful questioning look at Tony who stood there with the knife dripping blood held tightly in his hand.

"He came at me with a knife, so I defended myself. I swear," Tony said before bursting into laughter and slamming her front door closed, locking it and walking over to where Jasmine knelt next to Billy. He yanked her to her feet and pushed her into her living room.

Jasmine resisted but was pushed harder into the living room when suddenly one final heavy-handed push and she tripped over her rug and was sent sideways to the floor. Quickly she rolled into a sitting position before attempting to get to her feet. But she couldn't. Tony was standing with his legs parted and his left hand on her shoulder forcing her to stay down with his right hand waving the bloodstained knife around.

"What do you want?"

"If that interfering boyfriend of yours would have only left when I told him, then everything would be okay. Because of his stubbornness I have no choice but to kill you." Tony held his head down a little as if he really felt remorse.

"Kill? What the fuck. I thought we had something?"

"We did. Aren't you listening? Blame your boyfriend, Billy!"

"He's not my boyfriend, and he's dead now so you don't have to kill me." Jasmine said lifting the corners of her mouth into a smile. Tony looked away, then back at her, his eyes meeting hers and for a flicker of a moment he believed her. If it wasn't for the tell-tell signs that sprung to life within the depths of Jasmine's brown eyes he'd have bought into her tale. She was

that believable. He roughly grabbed at her shoulder with his left hand and swung the knife from his right hand across her chest. She flinched in milliseconds, enough so that the cut he made wasn't too deep.

Tony lifted his right hand into the air and as he began to bring the blade down she managed to worm herself out of his grip and scamper sideways. The knife made a whistling sound as it hit nothing but air. She could see his fury rage.

Jasmine continued to crab-like herself away from him, each time he went to grab her again she managed to just move out of reach. Jasmine's fearful glance caught Tony's white knuckles as he clenched the knife so hard. She looked at his face, he was gritting his teeth and his jaw had elapsed forward protruding his cleft chin into an ugly hole. She herself was red faced and filling with desperation. Her body tightened, and she felt all of her muscles pulling and retracting into tight masses that caused her unbearable pain. He lashed out suddenly kicking her in the legs.

"Stay still you fucking cunt."

"No." She hissed and darted out of the way. This time she used the sofa to get herself up and make a run for the front door. He was too fast, grabbing her roughly by her shirt and yanking her backward. She refused to fall. Standing unstably, she grounded herself.

She screamed out in horrific pain and arched her body forward as she felt a series of punches across her back. She swung around and kicked Tony in the balls. It was so hard and fast that he dropped the knife and grabbed a hold of his burning nuts. Spittle sprayed out of his mouth as he grumbled in pain. Jasmine took the chance to grab the knife, but Tony pushed his pain aside and grabbed at her hand, snapping two of her fingers. She bit down on her lip breaking the delicate skin as she howled out in excruciating pain. Jasmine withdrew her broken fingers to her chest and using her other hand to block his oncoming punches.

His first punch was in the side of her head above the ear and it was so forceful she felt her head would split like a log. A ringing in her ear as the second to the side of her temple felt like she'd been hit by a hammer. She couldn't stop the punches. They came in so fast and hard, and she felt every single one helpless to stop them. Her nose was bleeding, and she could feel her eye socket break. Hearing it crack inside her head was the most sickening sound she'd ever heard. It was at this time she believed he'd won.

Defeated she let herself fall to the blood-soaked floor and lay there defenseless awaiting her fate. The *fate* of death.

She wanted to tell him to hurry up, but her lips were swollen shut. A rustling and hard thump with glass breaking assaulted her ear drums. She thought he'd slammed her head with more punches. but the sound was in front of her, like someone had fallen. Jasmine tried to open her eyes, but they were swollen shut. With a big inhale of breath, she awaited his final move. It never came. She exhaled and wriggled on the floor putting her unbroken hand out in front, trying to feel, feel for anything and anyone. Jasmine unexpectedly flinched at the touch of a hand. It was sticky and wet. Unable to talk, or see yet somehow, she knew the hand holding hers was not that of Tony's. Who she wondered. Her neighbor was all she could think of before she passed out.

"Jasmine. Wake up. Please wake up," Billy's voice begged softly but consistent. "Help is coming Jazz, it's coming."

He used every bit of energy and called 911. He'd managed to grab the vase of flowers and hit Tony over the head with it, knocking him out cold. Panic grew in Billy, he had to get Jasmine out before Tony woke. Each time he moved his stomach pumped out squirts of gore. He pressed his shirt into the knife wound. Wincing in pain he got behind Jasmine, placed his arms under her arm pits and dragged her outside. He got as far as the footpath when in the distance he heard sirens and saw silver stars float across his eyes. He fell to his knees and then keeled over. Resting on Jasmine's shoulder he passed out.

Inside Tony came too. He fumed and debated chasing after Billy and Jasmine, but it was the sirens that detoured him. He held his bleeding head and went out the back, escaping. His revenge would have to wait. He left the little town and headed straight to another.

He would be back!

The End

Bogeyman

Nightmares

Little Adam sat on the porch in the middle of summer without a care in the world. He licked his melting chocolate cone with a happy-go-lucky smile imprinted on his face. Just another hot and lazy Sunday with nothing to do but have fun. Being seven-years old had its perks, especially during the summer time in the vibrant town of Newton Springs.

His father, Bryce, had just finished setting up the zoom-slide and after Adam finished his ice cream he would slip-n-slide his way into oblivion of water heaven. Excitedly he licked up the last of his ice cream and rushed off the porch taking a nose dive onto the zoom-slide. Ann watched from the kitchen window while she chopped and prepared apples to make her famous summery apple pie. Her face lit up with a joy only a mother could have. Adam ran around the zoom-slide and dived belly first again and again. His happy squeals travelling throughout the neighborhood.

Bryce came inside for a cup of cold water, and like magic Ann handed him one without him even asking. She knew him inside and out.

With a smile she kissed him on the lips and took herself outside. “Adam, sweet cheeks. It is time to come in.”

“Ow, really mom... do I have to?”

“Yes. Come on I have made your favorite lunch.”

“Really, you made macaroni and cheese?”

“I did.” Her smile deepened when Adam raced up to her and almost bowled her over with a hard hug. He wet the front of Ann’s summer dress.

“Wait a minute young man. Remember the rules. Here take this.” Ann handed him a large fluffy yellow towel and watched him rub down his legs and then wrap it around his waist.

“Okay, good enough.” She said and followed him inside. He was already at the dining table waiting in anticipation of his macaroni and cheese.

Ann dished him and Bryce up a good helping, and then she served herself a chicken salad. They sat down and ate with little chatter. She knew she’d done her job well. She watched them eat with grins as large as a Cheshire cat.

After the meal, as promised, Bryce played a board game with Adam. He let his son win. The game was put away, and Adam took his Lego pieces outside to build an airport complete with a tower and two planes.

Later on, after dinner and a movie, it was time for Adam to go to bed. He was always fussy, like a toddler, come bedtime. Ann thought that moving from Ohio to Newton Springs would erase the nightmares Adam suffered, but it did little to abolish them. In her mind they had increased. She was in battle with Bryce over getting Adam therapy and often found herself thinking that it was time, that she should do it. But her resistance always won the argument. She would put it off until she couldn't.

Bryce avoided Adam's bedtime saga by conveniently going out with his friend, Mark. He would always go at 7:00 p.m. and return at 10:30 p.m. As always, by the time he walked through the door, Adam was sound asleep. Ann didn't mind it at first, but after a year of this she started to argue with him about it. He always won that fight by throwing in her face that she refused to get therapy for Adam. Either she caved and got therapy for Adam or she accepted Bryce not being there. It was something that plagued her mind. For now she dealt with it. Knowing the routine of Adam made it a little less debilitating to deal with.

Adam's routine always started with the resistance to getting into bed. A ritual of her having to check under the bed and inside of the closet. Followed with a joke book, a glass of warm milk, a back rub and a game of eye spy. The last bit was getting harder on her. She had to lay beside him until he fell asleep. If she tried to sneak out too soon he would start balling his eyes out in hysterics. With a deep sigh she followed the ritual as always and at 9:55 she slipped out of his room and closed his bedroom door halfway. Leaving the hall light on was another thing she had to do for Adam. If she didn't, and he woke, he would scream the house down.

She took herself to the den and had only just got half way through a show when Bryce walked in. They made idle chit chat. He gave her a kiss on the cheek and then he turned in for the night. Ann stayed on the couch for another hour watching some sitcoms. She turned everything off and quietly got into bed next to Bryce. She was exhausted and quickly fell asleep.

Two rooms down the hall Adam had been asleep for three hours when he reluctantly opened his eyelids. He fought against the sting of wind that blew at his eyes rendering every muscle in his tiny body to freeze. His lips

quaked and dried quickly. As his eyes flutter open he saw the bogeyman hovering over him with a bent, abnormally short nose. He shuts his eyes quickly and tightly. The cold wind brushed across his shut eyelids causing him to shiver. He held his breath as long as he could, but inevitably let out a gasp at the same time he opened his eyes. The monster was going back inside his closet, but it was looking directly at him. Enticing him to go with it. It beckoned him with a clawed finger. "Play with me." It whispered. Fear shut down Adam's body and he almost wet his pants. A horrific scream escaped his lips. His closet door closed fully, and the lights came on. He looked up into the fearful face of his mom.

"Mommy he was here. He is in my closet. Mommy please make it stop," he begged.

Ann went to the closet, and in her normal routine, opened it wide to show Adam there was nothing in there. When she looked back at Adam, he could see inside the closet. He screamed louder as the thing inside showed itself with barred teeth and big deadly cold eyes behind his mother. When Ann turned around to face the closet, she saw nothing but his toys and clothing. She stepped inside and put her arms out reaching every corner proving to Adam that there was nothing there. She kept hoping if she did this night after night, Adam would be convinced it was just a nightmare.

Tonight, he felt different. It was the first time the bogeyman had shown itself behind his mom's back. It took him another two hours to calm down enough to finally fall asleep. When he woke in the morning, it was as if nothing had happened in the night. He padded to the kitchen and waited for his breakfast.

Ann rubbed at her tired eyes. Her long hair had turned messy and hung wayward across the top of her forehead covering parts of her light blue eyes. Bryce slept through the commotion as he always did and he jokingly made fun of Ann's new bird-nest hairdo.

"Joke all you like. Tonight, you are getting up when Adam wakes," she huffed while she poured him a cup of coffee and one for herself.

She handed a bowl of cereal to Adam and let the day begin. When Bryce left for work he dropped Adam off to school and Ann went back to bed. She overslept, sleeping past midday, resulting in a mad panic to get her chores done before Adam got home from school. She managed and just as she finished, Adam raced through the door waving a certificate in his hand. He'd got an A++ in Health.

“Well-done sweet cheeks. How was the rest of your day?”

“It was great, mommy. Can I have some chocolate cake?”

Ann nodded happily and dished him some cake. She spent an hour helping him with homework, then prepared dinner. Before she knew it, it was Adam’s bedtime and the routine of it began like clockwork.

The Closet

Seven-year old Adam blinked open his eyes and uneasily they tracked toward the opening closet door. He pulled the bedsheet up to the lower rims of his eyes, and he squinted hard at the door. His little heart raced so hard he could feel it in his toes. He wanted to call for his mother and father, but when he opened his mouth he quickly shut it with a tight bite. The door had opened even more. His eyes shot a quick look at the bedroom door. For just a second, he contemplated jumping from his bed and rushing out of his room. The more he thought the more the closet door widened.

His bulging orbits catch something, movement, albeit small, and he froze as still as an iceberg. His pupils darted left and right, up and down. Everything was silent, too silent. The door opens a little more and he could now see his large stuffed teddy. In the dim light, the teddy's eyes looked like angry cat's eyes and he cowers further under his blanket. Adam was unable to look away. He found his bedsheets had lowered down past his chin. He quickly pulled the sheet back up tighter over his little bubble shaped nose.

Sharpened talons snuck out across the door frame. Adam felt his breathing grow harder and faster. Through a chilling dizziness that almost overwhelmed him, he was incapable of taking his eyes off the grey, bony fingers with long sharp nails that gripped the closet door. They slowly edged it open bit by bit. Adam dropped the sheet and put his little hands to his ears when the thing in his closet starts rapping its scalpel nails across the door, tapping in the rhythm of Adam's own heartbeat. Finally, he found his voice and screamed for his mother.

He grabbed the sheet again almost smothering his face. He was too afraid to look away and focused his eyes without blinking at the opening door. Adam cried out for his mother even louder. He let go of the sheet to rub his eyes, which burned with the strain of watching the closet door. With the door opened up more, he could see the smaller teddy next to his larger one. The smaller stuffed bear seemed to move and Adam believed it was coming alive. He shrank back as he saw the bears mouth open showing vicious looking teeth. It was going to eat him! Thoughts of flushing it down the toilet invaded his young mind, while a stream of tears saturate his face. He felt pressure building up around his temples.

The door inched open a little more crippling him further into a state of shock which made him shiver violently. He peered over the top of his sheet, and his mouth stretched wider to give a long, loud, ear piercing cry. His mother rushed in, and staggering in behind her was his father. Before Ann could ask what was wrong, she followed Adam's line of sight and looked at his closet door ajar.

"Bryce how many times have I told you to fix that door. Adam don't worry sweetie, it is just a nightmare," Ann said calmly as she padded to the closet door. Bryce rubbed at his tired eyes and sat on the corner of Adam's bed. He placed his right hand over the blanket and patted Adam's lower legs for comfort. Ann reached the closet and pushed it shut, but it sprung back open. She pushed on it harder yet it refused to close. She uses all of her muscles, grounding her feet deeply into the carpeted floor, and forces the door shut. When it finally did, she felt triumphant. She turned and walked toward Adam's bed to embrace him in a consoling hug. Bryce startled her when he unexpectedly jumped off the bed shaking his hands in disgust.

"Damn it, the kid just wet his bed, again."

"Bryce watch your tone. He's traumatized you can clearly see that."

"He's seven! Is this even normal at his age?"

"Stop talking Bryce. You are tired and aren't thinking clearly. Don't make things worse. Go back to bed, and I'll change his sheets... Just go before I say something that will start a fight."

Bryce shook his head in disappointment and whispered, "Mollycoddling him will only make him a sissy."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," Bryce replied angrily and stormed out of the room.

Ann gritted her teeth and pulled her jaw inward giving her forehead a few extra creases. She sat on Adam's bed and hugged him tightly. "You'll be okay. I promise sweet cheeks, you'll be okay." She could feel her body shake with the shivers from Adam and it saddened her. She felt that perhaps Bryce was right, that maybe it was time to get Adam seen by a professional. His nightmares were becoming a nightly occurrence. Ann found her thoughts betraying her. She argued with herself and felt bitterly upset for even considering therapy for her child. She convinced herself that he was a normal seven-year old and that the nightmares would go. The bedwetting was just a part of the process she told herself, while picking Adam up and placing him gently on the floor.

She went to his set of drawers, pulled out a fresh pair of pajamas and handed them to him. “Get yourself changed, sweetie and I’ll make up your bed with fresh new sheets.”

Adam didn’t move. His little hazel eyes were fixated on the closet door. His arms stabbed at him with sharp gooseflesh.

“Adam, it is okay. I would like you to get dressed please. I’m going to get some new sheets from the hall closet and when I get back I expect you to be all changed.” Ann thought that he was hitting the shy age and didn’t want to get changed in front of her. She started to leave, but Adam seized her roughly around the waist. Tears drenched her pajama top and she could feel his quaking as he shook like an aftershock.

“Adam what is wrong?”

But he didn’t talk, he couldn’t talk, he didn’t blink, he just stood stiff like an iron rod and gazed fearfully at his closet.

“Do you want me to look inside for you? Will that make you feel better?”

“Noooooooooooooooooo,” Adam screeched and squeezed tighter to Ann’s hips. “Noooooooooooooooooooo! Nooooooooooooooooooooo!”

“Adam, stop. You have to stop. Daddy will be mad if he has to get out of bed again. Please, be a good boy and stop screaming.”

“Noooooooooooooooooooo!”

“Adam Lawrence Mackey you stop that right now,” Ann sternly said while she attempted to peel Adam’s hands away. He was pinching into her skin and it was beginning to hurt.

“Damn it! Stop it, Adam! Stop now!”

Bryce stomped his way down the hallway and into Adam’s room. He ripped him away from Ann and was about to spank him on the bottom when the closet door fully opened wide and out stepped the most hideous of creatures either of them had ever seen. Ann and Bryce exchanged a startled look to confirm they were both seeing the same monster, then they both pushed Adam behind them. Bryce couldn’t believe his eyes. He had never seen anything like what stood before them, not even in his worst nightmares. As it inched itself forward it grew taller right before their eyes.

Ann flinched at its barred teeth and cold dark eyes. The bogeyman’s flesh was mottled and bumpy with a bald head. When it moved another step forward Ann noticed its muscular power and extraordinarily longer arms. His clawed feet tore the carpet fibers with each step it took.

“What the hell is that?” She blurted out.

Like a ball of wool unfurling, Bryce let out a string of curses as if somehow swearing at it would make it go away. For a moment Bryce hesitated, torn between grabbing his wife and child and fleeing from the room or running out to grab his gun. When the monster snapped at the air with its vicious jaws Bryce made the decision to run for his gun. He returned moments later, gun in hand.

“Get Adam and get out of the house,” he ordered. “Call the damn cops.”

Ann picked up Adam and immediately felt like she was carrying a dead weight. He was in such shock that he felt as heavy as 100 pounds. Bryce needed them to be past the thing before he shot it. What felt like minutes, in reality, were only several seconds. Once they were out of the room he took aim. Despite the summer warmth his skin turned icy, like his blood had frozen in his veins. That’s when the adrenaline kicked in for Bryce and without hesitation he shot once, then a second, and finally a third time. The thing didn’t go down. It laughed heinously at him and swiftly struck him across the chest opening him up like a boiled chicken.

Gore splattered and sprouted downward like a busted sprinkler drenching him and the carpet beneath his feet. The bogeyman let out a roar like a prehistoric beast as it continued to slice open Bryce’s chest ripping his ribs out effortlessly. In a nanosecond Bryce dropped the gun and looked agape at the creature before looking down and seeing his busted ribs making a pile on the floor next to his feet like twigs ready for a camp fire. He felt the searing heat first, then a rush of what felt like a river straight to his heart flooding him with a drowning feeling. His mind was unable to think, his vision grew darker and his heart slowed almost abruptly stopping. He folded like a beach chair and crumbled into a heap over his own broken ribs and splattered ichor. His body sprawled out like a crumpled tent. He was dead in an instant.

Ann didn’t look back when she heard the gun shots. Instead, panicked, she held tighter to Adam who had paled significantly. She stopped in the hallway briefly to inspect him. She noted how wet his hair was and how ghostly white he’d turned causing her to panic even more. Carefully, she lowered her head to his and listened for his breathing. When she heard it, she heaved him higher onto her hip and took in a deep lung full of air to catch her own labored breath.

She rushed toward her room to get the phone, but something had Adam screaming in her ear so loudly that she thought he'd blow her eardrums. She stiffened, her whole body filled with adrenaline. She had a feeling the monster was coming for her; a quick glance over her left shoulder proved her right. Her breath escaped as a hissing sound and her heart pounded against her ribcage in a violent drumming. She stumbled into her bedroom slamming the door closed and locking it.

She placed Adam on her bed and looked him over. His cheeks were flushed, and his freckles had lost their coloring. His hair had glued to his forehead and to the back of his neck. It reminded her of when he had a high fever with tonsillitis. She quickly grabbed her phone and instantly dropped it when she was startled by the door being pounded hard followed by an alarming growl. She could feel her pulse throbbing in her neck and the feeling of her stomach sinking to her feet. She had to be brave for Adam. She had to protect him. Her motherly instincts flooded her, and she flew into action.

"Don't worry sweet cheeks... he can't get in here." Ann reached down and kissed Adam's forehead. It was as cold and damp as if he'd been sitting inside a freezer. She reached down to grab the phone off the floor when the door swung wide open with an almighty bang. She dropped to her knees and accidently knocked the phone under the bed. Her eyes widened in terror. She didn't have time to grab Adam as the beast was advancing on her fast. Her heart thudded and skipped several beats when she felt the talons slice at her arms. Each time she made a grab for the phone she was cut, and her skin hung off her arms like frayed ribbons. Her blood trickled down and dropped onto the carpeted floor reminding her of spilled wine. Ann didn't want to look at the monster, but it was hard not to. It towered over her taunting her. She got up off her knees and scooped Adam into her arms. "Be brave sweet cheeks," she whispered.

The bogeyman let out a rip curdling roar as if to stifle her words to Adam. "Go downstairs and hide," she ordered and put Adam down. He stood deathly still, as quiet and motionless as a towering mountain. "Go! Go now!" She yelled and pushed him to move. He stumbled over, and the bogeyman made a step toward him. His colossal size, almost touching the ceiling, had him stooped over into a curve as he reached a grotesque arm out toward Adam.

“Don’t touch him,” Ann shrilled and got between them and was stabbed through the stomach. Adam hesitated for a few seconds before he rushed out of the bedroom and hid in the spare bedroom’s wardrobe. Ann gripped so tightly onto her pajama top that her knuckles turned bright red. She was unable to breathe properly. All she could do was give off deep wheezes. Her lips dried and cracked like the foundations of 200-year old buildings.

The bogeyman elongated its body from the ceiling, lowering itself toward Ann’s face. She closed her eyes and wished the beast away. When she flicked open her lids she watched in horror as he stabbed at her with stupendous speed. Each time his momentum picking up. Slashing, slicing, and dicing. In shock she watches her skin fly into the air like dust particles.

She tried to speak, and it came out in a frothy bubble. “Don’t hurt my boy.”

It was the last thing she said.

Ann felt her heart ebb into the darkness and then there was nothing. The bogeyman let out a high-pitched scream and gelatinous goo flung from its mouth like melted mozzarella. It skitters out of the room sniffing at the air, instantly smelling out Adam. He left a trail behind of rancid saliva that dripped and dribbled from his mouth onto the carpeted floor.

Adam

Adam peered through the crack in the closet he had hidden in. He could hear the creature making its way down the hall. The sound it made when it walked tore Adam's heart in two. His legs accidently shook knocking the closet door. He quickly sat on his legs. He then lay on his belly, looked under the crack of the door and lost color when he saw the ugly sharp feet. His heart jumped about when he watched the clawed feet drag across the floor like a scorpion. He felt his chest burning and that familiar ache was the one he got each time the bogeyman was coming for him.

He reached around the closet floor with a shaky hand, searching for a weapon, but found none. Adam wanted to yell hysterically but he knew the thing out there had just killed his parents and it was now going to kill him. He remembered his mother's words. 'Stay strong and fight the nightmare.' He didn't want to die. He looked back under the crack of the closet and his eyes could no longer see the creature. *"Where did it go?"* he asked himself and then his eyes caught movement again. This time inside the closet with him. He almost died of fright as a dark shadow blackened a section above his head. Adam gulped and almost swallowed his tongue.

He coughed and splattered spit, then looked back up and to his horror a face was emerging like out of dark fog and into the light it appeared. His eyes rolled sideways, left, right, up and down. "Stay away from me!" he screamed. The creature elongated its face showing teeth and dribbling goo all over Adam.

"Play with me!" The bogeyman said, as it slithered out exposing its talons and knocking on the inside of the closet door in the same rhythm as Adam's skipping heartbeat. "No!" Adam screamed and pushed open the closet door. He rushed to the other side of the room. The window was open enough to blow the white lace curtain across Adam's head scaring him into a fit of panic. He looked up and once he realized it was just the curtain he looked back at the closet then quickly his eyes scanned the room in search of something to defend himself with.

The creature slowly inched itself out of the closet and stood eyeballing Adam with its deathly cold orbs. It slithered closer growing taller again. It started at four feet, and then six feet. By the time it was within touching distance, it had grown to ten feet tall.

Adam tried to back up further, but he couldn't. The wall prevented him from it. He turned, grabbed a hold of the window ledge and hefted himself up. As he turned to make sure the creature wasn't going to grab him, he fell out of the window. He landed awkwardly on his side. He felt bruised but not broken. He shook off the dizzy feeling and made a run for it. He didn't know where he was going. It was all dark and unfamiliar. He saw lights from a distant house and made a run for it. Just as he was climbing the stairs to the house the bogeyman appeared and yanked him back so hard and fast it winded him. He lay there looking up at the beast and burst into tears. His little arms flaying round like propellers and his screams grew louder.

Just as the bogeyman was about to pick Adam up, the door to the house opened and an elderly man rushed out in answer to Adam's screams. He saw the boy on the ground and thought the child was having a fit. He didn't see the bogeyman. He called to his wife and they both scooped Adam up and bought him inside their house. The bogeyman let off a horrifying growl and vanished. The police were called. Adam was taken to the hospital and checked over. An investigation was opened into the death of his parents. No killer was ever found. Several days passed before his mother's sister Janice came to collect him. She arrived with his Uncle Pete, and they took him back to Wisconsin to live with them and their two children, Molly and Ivan.

Five months had gone by and Adam finally felt at ease.

The bogeyman was finally gone...

Until that cold winter night it stood over him with a vehement grin, dripping putrid goo all over him.

"Play with me."

The End

Siphon

The Drain

Jessica Thorn put her headphones on, set her iPhone to her music folder and let it run through her collection of favorites while she got straight into cleaning. She didn't mind being a housecleaner it gave her the extra money needed and time away from her husband, Mark. The first thing she always did was the dusting. She bopped up and down and swung her hips to the tunes only she could hear.

After the dusting was completed, she tended to the vacuuming, all four rooms including the dining and bathroom. She loved working for the Matthews, since their house was the smallest house on her cleaning list. When she was doing the master bedroom, she stopped and held the vacuum hose up, pretending it was a guitar, watching herself in the large double door mirrors.

She twisted and turned her body pretending to be a rock star, throwing her hips out and posing at the end of the song on one knee. She chuckled at herself and then carried on doing the rest of the house. By the time she finished the vacuuming, she had worked up a sweat and grabbed at her hip for her water bottle.

Without looking she unscrewed the top, put it to her parched lips and took a gulp. When no water came out she automatically retreated to the kitchen to fill it back up using the Matthews' fridge water. But that was empty too. She had no choice but to fill it with tap water and this irritated her more than anything. How she hated tap water.

Jessica screwed up her face in protest and let the cold water run from the tap for a few seconds before she put the nozzle of her bottle to the faucet. She noticed that the water wasn't going down the drain. She turned the faucet off once her bottle was half filled and eagerly guzzled it down.

She filled her water bottle up halfway again and while she drank, she grabbed a knife and started poking at the drain to see if she could unblock it. The knife went into the holes without resistance, and she couldn't see what would be causing the sink to fill up.

Jessica tried a few more times, but each time she turned the water back on and let it run into the sink, it would fill it as though it was plugged. Frustrated but determined to unblock whatever it was causing this, she hunted through the kitchen drawers until she found some wooden skewers.

She took one out and pushed it down the drain holes, one by one until she'd poked all 6 holes. Then tested the water again. Jessica stood on her tippy toes stretching her calf muscles as she watched the sink fill again. She remembered the plunger and rushed off to the laundry where it was kept. After she gave it a rinse in the laundry sink she went back to the kitchen and pushed the rubber lips hard over the drain hole. She pumped it up and down a few times. She almost hit herself in the chin when the handle of the plunger came away from the sink too fast. Laying the plunger on the floor, she turned the tap on and watched the sink fill again.

Frustrated and feeling defeated she thought she'd give it one more go with the plunger before phoning the Matthews. She sat the rubber mouth of the plunger over the holes again and pushed down hard, then suddenly yanked it up. Jessica did this two more times. On her third time the plunger seemed stuck. She grabbed tight and pulled on it hard. But it was as if something was holding onto it.

Jessica leaned closer to the sink, her belly pressed firmly against the edge of the bench leaving no room not even for an ant. Yet she still managed to somehow get even closer. Using both of her hands she held onto the plunger and pulled it upward. Still it did not move. Frustration got the better of her and she started whacking the handle back and forth, yet it didn't move. It was like hitting a stationary car. She grabbed a hold of the handle once more and pulled. This time she felt it loosen and so she yanked even harder when without warning the plunger propelled upward impaling Jessica's right eye. Without warning a pair of liquid hands materialized out of the drain grabbing her shoulders. They forced her head toward the sink. Inch by inch they firmly dragged her lower driving the plunger until it pushed its way up through at an angel missing her brain, but skimming over the top and out through the other side. The end of the plunger jutted out through her skull covered in gore.

Jessica was in so much shock she took a moment before realizing her eye was plastered to her cheek and her face was being further pulled into the sink. She felt a sudden pressure envelop her as every bone in her face was crushed. It was the sound of her own bones being pulverized into ash that would haunt her into the afterlife. Before her good eye was squeezed out of its socket she watched in utter horror as her face went into the drain. All of Jessica's organs, muscles and bones turned to liquid as she was sucked down the drain hole. Her shoes stayed behind, empty of the feet that

once warmed them. The sink gave off a burping sound as it bubbled up a bloody foam.

Then as if human, it swallowed, and the drain was clear once more.

Mad

“Mom, why did Jessica leave her shoes in the kitchen?” Sixteen-year old Cody quibbled as he made himself a drink, kicking the shoes out of the way.

“That’s not all she left behind. Just look at this.” Catrina ordered her husband Terry to look, half ignoring her son, Cody.

“Does she usually leave the cleaning stuff out?” Terry asked, while not really paying too much attention. His own stomach growled, and he wondered why Jessica had left, and who would prepare dinner.”

“Terry, are you even listening to me? I’m going to make a formal complaint to the cleaning service in the morning. This is just unacceptable. Be a dear and put the vacuum away for me. I’m going to take a bath.”

“What about dinner?” Terry grumped and rolled his eyes, as he unplugged the cord to the vacuum and pushed the button on the vacuum cleaner. He watched the cord retract. Once it was all the way in he picked it up and put it into the hall cupboard. Cody had taken himself to the living room and was watching T.V. passing time until dinner was ready. He wasn’t paying any attention to his parents.

“Dad, can we play Dust to Dragons?”

“Sure, you get the virtual headsets ready, and we will duel each other. I have a feeling you won’t win this time,” Terry snickered, as he fetched himself a beer and called for a pizza before heading off to the living room where Cody was already waiting with the virtual headset. Terry set the rest of the equipment up and gave a fleeting look toward the bathroom upstairs where he knew Catrina would be happily immersed in the bath for at least an hour.

“Let’s rock-n-roll son,” Terry said eagerly.

Once the headsets were snugly on, nothing else could be heard. The game was on surround sound and it was turned up louder by Cody because he loved to hear every single roar that the dragons made. Even his eyes smiled Terry thought, as he shifted a few feet away from his son, not wanting to knock him out should he flay his arms about like the last time they played.

“Figure it out,” Catrina hollered from upstairs. “I’m too angry to bother cooking. Neither Terry nor Cody heard her. She walked into her large room

and as she opened her drawers for her silk pyjamas she swore repeatedly. *"Why that little bitch. I knew that cleaning service was too good to be true. Bastards! Just wait until I give them a piece of my mind."*

She swung her dressing gown over her shoulders and took herself into the master bathroom. Catrina plugged the bath drain and filled the tub until it almost spilled over the edge. Before stripping she squirted some bubble bath in and was annoyed that she'd forgotten to do it while the bath was filling. She removed her clothing and placed them in the hamper, then climbed into the tall, oversized porcelain tub and submerged herself until she'd covered her head. Tiny little bubbles rose to the surface from her nostrils and after 45 seconds she lifted her head out of the water and took a deep breath in.

With her hands placed on either side of the tub, she submerged herself again, desperately trying to erase the day. Her mind began to empty, and she soon started to relax. Closing her eyes, she let the water cascade over her while she imagined she was in the ocean.

Catrina opened her eyes when she felt a strange sensation sucking at her right heel directly over the drain hole. She pulled her knees up dragging her feet away from the plug and looked down. All she could see was bubbles. She slid to the side and used her hands to feel along the bottom of the tub until they reached where the plug should be. Catrina felt around for it, but it was nowhere to be found. She sat for a moment and pondered why the water was not going down. Dismissing the water not draining away she lay back again wondering what happened to the plug.

She closed her eyes pushing the days thoughts out, emptying her mind and when she was completely relaxed she fell asleep. Her legs automatically stretched outward, with her right heel resting over the drain hole. Abruptly and painfully she was startled awake when she felt a violent tug on her heel. She pulled her foot back hard, but it was stuck. Not wanting to alarm Terry and have him laugh at her for getting her heel stuck in the drain, she used all her muscles and heaved as hard as she could. Water went splashing over the tub drenching the floor.

Catrina cast her eyes over the floor disgusted with herself for making a mess. Quickly her orbs diverted back toward the front of the tub, unable to figure out how her heel was so firmly stuck. She scooted forward. With her hands she tried to pry her heel out of the hole. When she bought her hands up out of the water she was shocked to see them reddish pink. The water

was blue from the bubble bath mix and yet it was looking more like dark purple/red, staining her hands a diluted red.

She inspected them more and as she looked hard at the palms of her hands her body jolted forward while instantly feeling the heat from her heel radiate up her calf and into the back of her thigh. Beads of sweat started to form on her upper lip. Her eyes widened while her lower limbs trembled. She could feel the warm stream of liquid running under her feet, but her mind tried to deny what she knew to be happening.

There was no longer any hesitation or worry of being laughed at by Terry. She called out in a panic. But he could not hear her cries for help. Her screams were almost like a strangled cry and the more she screamed for Terry the more water she splashed about. Waves toppled freely over the edge of the tub, flooding the floor and soaking into the carpet.

Once the water had moved softly caressing Catrina's body, now it stormed about, swirling, rippling and without mercy it took on a life of its own, spilling and splattering about.

Catrina winced at the pain of her heel and her mind threw her a barrage of questions. What did I do? When was I bad? Who did I piss off? Why is this happening to me? Dear God, why? With great reluctance she pulled her leg backward, but the effort was futile. She placed her palms on the edge of the tub and pushed down hard and fast. More gore bled into the water, splashing onto the floor in lines of spray, as she thrashed around trying to free herself.

She heard a pop first, then felt the tug, a tear and an almighty sucking. Instantly it brought a memory to her mind of the time she was in Bali on a snorkelling trip with Terry. She got her leg stuck between two rocks and an eel came out to say hello. She remembered panicking and almost drowning.

Pulling herself up into a full sitting position she gathered her strength and wrenched herself forcefully backward. She felt another strong tug and could hear her skin tearing. She watched in horror as the tub fills with dark red. She knew she ripped the skin off of her foot. She gritted her teeth. She didn't care! All she wanted was to be free!

Catrina's eyes blinked in rapid succession to what she saw beneath her stuck leg. Something forming like arms... liquid arms. She pulled back trying to get out of the tub while her leg was being yanked back... back toward the drain hole. A series of pops and mini like crunches were heard, like that of someone walking on seashells. Her leg was numb, but it was

when she watched her leg below the knee begin to turn into straw that she truly began to realize what was happening. Everything inside of her leg had eviscerated and been turned into liquid. The skin of that leg was the only visible evidence of her once having a leg. She threw up over herself when the watery hands continued to pull on that leg. Its hands, now above the knee, evilly squeezes while simultaneously dragging downward. She unwillingly watched as her thigh began to crumble into nothing and was sucked down the drain.

The liquid hands grabbed at her other leg and starting at her toes, she could feel each bone breaking, before it was turned into a thick milkshake of sorts. As it progressed up her calf toward her knee, she let out a shrilling scream. Still not loud enough to penetrate through the closed doors and reach downstairs to where her husband and son were still playing virtual Dust to Dragons.

Catrina turned her head and watched as speckles of her own blood dripped down the wall with the splashed water. She threw up again and then passes out.

The liquid monster continued to liquefy her and drink her down the drain. When it finished and there was nothing left of Catrina, it allowed the bathwater to drain out of the tub, washing away all evidence of Catrina and her puke.

Terry removed his headset just as the doorbell rang. He greeted the over happy, pizza delivery guy and gave him a tip of $5.00. The pizza guy's smile dissolved and his disappointment to the tip was evident. Terry didn't care, practically closing the door in the young man's pimply face. He took the pizza box to the dining table and got his son to sit and wait while he went to get Catrina.

As he opened the bedroom door, he could hear the water from the tub going down the drain. He didn't bother going into the bathroom, instead he just called out to Catrina, telling her that the pizza had arrived. He didn't wait for a reply. His stomach distracted his impatience. He ran back downstairs and saw that Cody had already taken a slice. Terry rolled his eyes, then grabbed a slice of pizza and sat opposite his son.

"Where's Mom?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full. She'll be down in a minute."

Cody finished his first slice and went in for a second. Terry was already on his third slice, when he looked down five minutes later there was only

one slice left.

"Better leave that one for your mom," Terry laughed.

"How come Mom didn't come down for dinner. Is she mad at us?"

"No, she's not mad at us. She's mad at the cleaning company."

"Because Jessica left her shoes behind?"

"Well no, because she left the cleaning equipment out."

"Oh, okay. Can I be excused?"

"Sure, what are you going to do now, son?"

"I'm going to do my homework and then get to sleep. You know it is late right?"

Terry looked at his wrist watch. They had got in just after 6:00 pm and now it was after 9:00. He crinkled up his face. "It is getting late, but we did have fun though."

"Yep, we did. Night, Dad."

"Night, son."

Cody rushed off and headed straight into his room. Terry rolled his eyes at the mess Cody left on the dining table. He was going to call him back to clean it, but figured he could do it faster. Once he'd cleaned the table and put the pizza box on the kitchen bench, he went to see what was keeping Catrina.

When he got into their bedroom, he saw that the bathroom door was still closed. Puzzled by this and knowing how much Catrina hated being barged in on, he didn't open the door. Instead, he stood by the bed and talked at the door.

"Hon, are you coming out of there anytime soon?"

Terry twiddled his thumbs and felt his eyes begin to roll when he got no reply.

"Hon, are you mad at me too? Catrina Rose, why are you ignoring me. I'm coming in."

He walked up to the bathroom door and immediately looked down when his feet sunk into the carpet. He kicked off his slippers and dipped his toes into the carpet confirming that it was drenched. Confused he knocked loudly on the door, announcing that he was coming in. He swung the door wide open and to his surprise Catrina wasn't in the bathroom. He momentarily stood dumbfounded and giggled to himself for talking to no one. It wasn't until he saw the pink colored walls dripping slowly into the empty tub that he wondered what on earth Catrina had been up to. He

chuckled when he remembered that sometimes she likes to dye her hair. With her mysteriously gone, he assumed she'd botched the job and was hiding to avoid being laughed at.

Terry didn't have the energy to play games and go on a hunt for Catrina. Instead, he grabbed his pyjamas and took a shower and then said goodnight to Cody. He explained that Catrina wasn't feeling well and would be in later to kiss him goodnight. Cody accepted that and carried on with his homework.

Terry took himself to the living room, and after pouring himself a nightcap of whiskey fire, he sat on the couch and watched the news. There were multiple reports of missing people. He lost interest in the news. After putting his empty glass on the coffee table, he sat back, got comfortable, and fell asleep waiting on Catrina. In the morning, he woke with a stiff neck and sore back.

Cody was already at the kitchen breakfast bar with a bowl of cereal. His dark blond hair was all tussled up and looking Mohawk like.

"Mom still sleeping?"

"Yeah," Terry half said as he left the kitchen and went upstairs.

The bed had not been slept in. He now started to worry and while he dressed into his day clothes he cast his mind on anything that could have upset her. Had he left the toilet seat up? He clearly remembered putting it back down. Had he not put the trash out? He clearly remembered putting the cans out. Had he not put the milk away? He clearly remembered replacing it in the fridge. Had he not emptied the dishwasher? He clearly remembered emptying it. Nothing in his mind persuaded him that he'd done anything to warrant her getting up and just leaving. His mind cast back to the pink stuff dripping down the wall of his bathroom. He walked in and inspected it closer, but it had all gone down the drain leaving nothing left but the white walls. He put his index finger to his chin and stood eyeballing the empty tub.

He vaguely remembered the news he had half watched before falling asleep. Something about missing people. Now he was unsure of anything.

Suddenly he was jolted back to the present when he heard his son screaming. Terry raced out of the bathroom, through the bedroom and down the stairs into the kitchen where Cody was crying and hollering. He was hunched back into an arch with his feet pressed on the doors under the sink and his right hand vanishing into the tub with his left hand pulling on his

right. When Terry got closer he could see that Cody's hand had disappeared down the drain, and though his mind could not wrap around this possibility whatsoever, he did everything he could to get his son's hand free.

"Hold on son. I got you."

"Hurry Dad! Something has my fingers. I can feel the bones. *Dad my bones*. My bones..." he wailed, "they are all broken. I can feel them." Tears flooded his face while his body shook violently.

Terry almost fell backward when he saw liquid shoot out of the drain hole and form into hands and arms pulling down on his son's hand. He witnessed his son's hand and arm disintegrate as though a great big vacuum had just sucked all the viscera out of it. All that was left was the skin which soon vanished. Everything was happening so fast. He was helpless to stop it. The only way he knew how to free his son was to cut his arm off.

"Dad, where are you going? Dad... please help me!"

"I am son. I'll be right back."

Terry raced off into the garage, found the saw and rushed back to the kitchen.

"What the hell, Dad! You can't! You just can't!"

"Son, if I don't do this you'll lose more than your arm. I don't know what that thing is, nor why it wants you, but I'm not about to let you go."

With the arguing and hesitation between them, Terry could see he was already too late. The water thing now had eviscerated Cody's arm completely and was working on his shoulder. There was no saving that arm, leaving Terry completely unsure of what to do. No amount of pulling his son worked. The thing in the drain was far too strong. Thinking on his feet, he rushed back to the garage and grabbed the container of chlorine. It was half empty after the last pool treatment. He was desperate. It was the only thing he could think of. It had to work. He ran back inside the house and poured the chlorine down the drain. He heard a ghost like squeal and watched as the liquid arms let go of his son's shoulder.

"Dad... I..." Cody's skin had turned milky white and the lids of his eyes fluttered shut. He spoke no more. Cried no more. Screamed no more.

Terry panicked thinking his son had died. He checked for a pulse. Thankfully, the boy had passed out.

He continued to pour the chlorine down the drain and watched as the monster started to disappear. When it was finally gone Terry scooped up his son. Carrying him to the car, he lovingly laid him on the backseat and

quickly jumped behind the wheel. He hit the steering wheel in frustration. In his panic he had forgotten his keys. He jumped back out and ran in an almost hysterical state to get them. Once in hand, and back in the car he put his foot to the floorboard and drove like a mad man to the hospital.

Doctors rallied around Cody and whisked him away. Frantic, Terry tried to follow, but was told to remain in the waiting room. He watched as the curtain was swiftly closed before he threw up in a nearby trashcan. A nurse helped him to a chair and had the vomit cleaned away.

"Please find out about my son. Please," Terry begged the nurse.

She looked into his tearful eyes and nodded yes. An hour passed before she reappeared with good news.

"Your son is alive. They had to give him two blood transfusions, and they have given him a strong sedative. The doctor will be out to see you shortly."

The nurse left Terry standing alone. He found himself in disbelief and angry that his wife was missing. Then it suddenly *hit him*! The red on the bathroom walls around the tub! Blood! Gore! Oh My God! That fucking thing in the drain got her too. It ate her.

He bowed his head, chin to chest and sobbed.

Terry felt a gentle touch on his shoulder. He lifted his head to meet the eyes of a short man with a very high receding hairline, and large rimmed glasses that sat low on the bridge of his nose. He held a stubby hand on top of Terry's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, are you my son's doctor?" Terry felt as if he had been drifting in a fog, and it was taking him a little while to get in the right headspace.

"Yes, I am Doctor Holiday. Your son has come through a champion, but I am afraid the damage to his shoulder was rather extensive. He is due to go into surgery, but he is asking to see you first. Please follow me." Doctor Holiday started to walk off, and it took Terry a moment before he finally caught up.

When the curtain pulled back and he saw his son laying there he did everything he could to stop himself from breaking down.

Terry put on his bravest face and walked up to his son. He leaned down and gave him a lingering kiss on his damp cheek. He could taste the salt from his son's tears. It was like being punched in the balls. He was grateful his son was alive but felt unequivocally devastated for him to have endured

such trauma, physically and mentally. The worst wasn't over. He still had to find a way to tell him that his mother wasn't coming back, ever!

"Dad, my arm... its gone!"

"I know son. I am so sorry." Terry did everything to mask the hurt he felt. A lone tear made its way out the corner of his left eye and sat like a frozen dot upon his own cheek. He took his son's remaining hand and held it in his.

"It's time," Doctor Holiday said in a low but urgent voice.

Terry stood back and watched as the orderly wheeled the bed out with his son looking like a tiny wounded soldier covered loosely in a white hospital blanket. Terry followed behind. His feet felt heavy, his heart ached and he was developing a migraine.

A nurse showed Terry to a different waiting room and there he sat mindlessly watching the T.V. until news of more people vanishing alerted him. He put his hand into his jeans pocket and pulled out his cell phone and called the police.

He was not sure what that thing was, but he knew how to *Kill* it.

The End

Junkyard

Planning

Derrick Marrow had done a lot of research for his latest book and decided he would take a trip to the abandoned town of Centralia, Pennsylvania. First, he just needed to convince his six-month pregnant wife, Julia. The more he thought about the town the more he felt the desire to experience the atmospheric conditions and to soak up every bit of eeriness that the ghost town offered. He waited until after dinner that night, and while he was giving Julia her nightly back rub he told her about the town and his idea.

"Babe, I think it would be great if we took a road trip."

"Really, where would we go?"

"Pennsylvania. Before you say no, here me out. There is an abandoned town there that would be perfect for my latest novel."

"You know I support you and your writing. It is just this." She rubbed her belly bump and Derrick reached his arms from behind and placed them on top of hers. He leaned into the crook of her neck and gave her a delicate kiss.

"You'll be just fine, you and baby. You'll just sit back, relax and enjoy the scenery."

Julia closed her eyes as Derrick started to rub her back again. He was gentle yet firm in just the right places, relaxing her. He paid special attention to the knots around her shoulders. He enjoyed rubbing at her smooth silky skin.

"Tell me all about this town then and I'll see." She smiled without opening her eyes.

"The town is deep within the coal regions of eastern Pennsylvania. Buried from the modern world lies a small, abandoned town, decades beyond hope." Julia thought her husband sounded like a writer even when he spoke. He was a gifted storyteller. She was enjoying his holiday time from his security job. Having him home for the next two weeks was doing him as much good as it was her. "One autumn night a coal miner started a fire near the mines. The fire spread in a short amount of time through the rich pockets of anthracite. It left an unstoppable underground coal fire in its wake. That was 49 years ago. The fire has been burning ever since."

"What? The fire is still burning? Isn't that dangerous?" she cooed through the feathery touches Derrick masterfully performed across the

middle of her back.

“Yes, it is still burning and that is the fascinating part,” Derrick spoke excitedly. “No, it isn’t dangerous if one sticks to the paths. Do you want to hear more about the town? I’ve memorized all of the facts.”

“I’m sure you did, and yes, actually I would love to hear more about this town.” Julia felt the heat from Derrick’s palms as they knead gently into her shoulders.

“Over time trapped smoke and fire were forced through the soil and spread through the town. It killed off all of the crops. The air become unhealthy to breathe, forcing the residents to abandon the town. It had a population of two thousand and now it is just a wasteland, that still remains hot to touch.”

“Are you sure it is safe. If it is hot to touch it might burn us? What about the toxins in the air, won’t that harm the baby?”

“Sounds like a place you wouldn’t want to spend a whole lot of time, huh? But trust me, we won’t be burned, and the toxins aren’t going to harm us either. There are safety paths for visitors to view from, kind of like going to the zoo and watching the animals.”

“When were you thinking of going?”

“In two days. I thought we could leave on Sunday. You know, a little less traffic to contend with.”

“Alright... I’m down with this adventure. It will be something to tell this baby in the years to come.” Julia smiled and giggled when Derrick leaned forward and kissed her shoulders so delicately it tickled.

“You are the most amazing wife a man could ever dream of having,” he said genuinely while kissing across her back. He left a tingling trail down her neck and across her shoulders. He spent an extra half an hour massaging her back and then he ran her a bubble bath. When she was soaking he took himself to his study, sat down and opened his laptop. His excitement about being in the very town that his book would be based plastered an unmovable smile on his face. He hadn’t noticed the time when Julia called out from the bedroom. He hadn’t even heard her getting out of the tub let alone the water running down the drain.

“Are you ever coming to bed?”

Derrick glanced at the clock on his laptop and noted it was after 1:00 am. He saved his work and put his laptop away. He climbed into bed wrapping his arms around Julia. His mind was too active to sleep. He lay

there thinking about his book and eventually sometime after 2:00 am he fell asleep.

Road Trip

“Are we there yet?” Julia asked mimicking a child’s voice.

Derrick laughed but squashed it pretty quickly with a few deep and very heavy sighs. He had his elbow resting on the window of his Audi SUV and the radio playing softly in the background.

“Well, Babe we aren’t there yet. I’ve gone and got us lost. It is what it is. I will get us back on the right road eventually.”

“Truthfully, I don’t mind. I’m too busy admiring the scenery. These towering trees spread for miles and miles. I wish I knew where we were though. I’d love to come back for a longer visit here one day.”

Derrick took his eyes off the road for a second to admire his wife. Her dark hair blew about with the breeze from the open window. Her dark skin glowed with a glint of sparkle from the moisturizer she’d used. His eyes hovered over her heaving breasts. Since she hit the second trimester he noticed how much bigger they had become. He loved it. He diverted his eyes back onto the road and decided to pull over to the shoulder.

“Why are we stopping?”

“I want to check the map on my cell phone and figure out where we are.”

“Oh, okay. I’m going to get out for a bit and stretch my legs.” Julia opened her door and slipped out. She stood at 5’6” with heels. Since getting pregnant, she opted for a more comfortable pair of runners instead of heels, making her feel shorter. She stood on tip toes using the car roof as support. When she’d done some stretches she moved around to the driver’s side, leaned in like a police woman and teased Derrick.

“Driver’s license and ID, Sir.”

“Very funny. I haven’t managed to lock onto a signal. I can turn around and go back the way we came, or we can continue on and see where this goes. What do you think, Babe?”

Julia watched birds take off from the canopy of trees and admired them as they soared through the sky and vanished past her line of sight. Her eyes fixed on a squirrel dashing up a nearby tree trunk. After she inhaled the earthly scent she turned back to Derrick.

“I think we just carry on. It has to lead somewhere, right?” Julia spoke softly, then walked back around the car and got in. She slipped on her

seatbelt and looked impatiently at Derrick.

"Okay, I'm going," he said through a few chuckles.

Derrick's mood shifted. He'd been driving two more hours without knowing where he was, and it was starting to agitate him. He twisted his favorite Phillies baseball hat and turned it backward. Julia on the other hand was very optimistic and it didn't bother her that they were lost. Normally it wouldn't have bothered Derrick either, except he desperately wanted to be exploring the abandoned town of Centralia. Julia had nodded off and was shocked awake when Derrick accidently turned the volume up on the radio.

"Sorry, Babe. I was trying to change the station. I got tired of the old songs. No one's got any decent R&B on."

Julia knuckled at her eyes with her right hand and stretched her legs out as far as the tiny space would allow. She felt a buildup of pressure in her lower abdomen and knew what that meant. The baby was sitting right on her bladder.

"Is there a gas station nearby?"

"Truthfully, I've seen nothing for the last two hours, except for the trees. I didn't know there could be so many damn trees."

"Why are you grumpy?" Julia asked while shifting to find a more comfortable spot. But the passenger seat wasn't giving her what she needed. She screwed up her face and looked out the window. When she caught the glimpse of the trees, and how they gave off an ancient look, she smiled and patted her belly.

"I'm hell mad because I still don't know where we are and there seems to be nothing out here but that forest you love so much."

"Remember what you always say to me, 'it is what it is'. Now pull over before I burst."

Derrick pulled over, and while Julia did her thing, he tried his cell phone again. He found no signal and got even more upset. He tossed his phone across the backseat of the car mumbling about how useless it was. He felt a warm hand slip around his waist. He held his breath and pulled himself into Julia. After a long hug, he went to the trunk of the SUV and pulled out two water bottles, handing one to Julia. Derrick motioned toward the grass shoulder and they sat for a while.

"Hon, are you packin'?" Julia questioned.

Derrick turned to face her and gave her a reassuring wink. "I never leave home without them." He gently tapped at his shoulder holster.

“How many have you brought with you?” Julia asked while she openly gazed at the forest.

“Three. Two derringers safely in my ankle holsters and my revolver. Why are you asking?”

“Well, don’t laugh. But when I was out doing my business I heard noises and thought about bears...”

“Well, don’t worry. You know you’re safe with me.” He scooted closer and leaned in placing a kiss on her warm cheek.

“Are you hungry, Babe?” Derrick asked, while he laid his head on her shoulder wrapping his arms around her waist.

“Not really. Are you?”

“No. I was just making sure you were good. We have another three hours of daylight, so we better make use of it.” He helped her up. They got back into the car and headed out.

He hadn’t been driving more than 40 minutes when he saw a sign, Penelope Creek. He took the road and followed it along believing that he’d reach some type of town and find out once and for all where they were. His stomach growled, and Julia gave him a funny look, then rubbed him on the belly.

“You have a baby in your belly too.” She almost snorted with laughter. Derrick’s mood softened, and he laughed with her. “See that wasn’t hard was it?”

“No, I guess it wasn’t. I’m sorry I got us lost. I saw a sign back there though and I think we might be heading into a town, hopefully.”

“Cool, and if we aren’t, then I think it would be time to turn back. At least then we can pick a spot along the road and camp in the forest for the night. I’m not having you driving all day and night. It is not worth the risk.”

Derrick nodded in agreement and his eyes filled with hope when he passed a Junkyard. It made him smile and he felt more relaxed.

“Finally signs of life. That junkyard should mean somewhere soon we will be in a town. I just hope it’s not filled with rednecks.”

“So long as it has a motel with a bath then I’ll be a very happy gal.”

Julia reached her hand over and squeezed Derrick’s thigh. He lowered his left hand and held it over hers. His eyes averted to look at her for just a second and he missed seeing the large pothole. The car thudded hard and veered off slightly, but he righted it quickly. His face was apologetic. He had reached his hand over and rested it on Julia’s thigh reassuring her that it

was okay. At first everything seemed okay, but after another five hundred yards he could feel that the car had a flat tire. He slowed down and pulled over to the shoulder.

Unexpectedly he slammed his hands on the horn and yelled, “Bastards!”

Julia jumped and furrowed her brow with a grimace spreading across her face. “What the hell was that for?”

“Babe, I am so forgetful. Remember when the car went in for a service and they found that the spare tire was bald. I took it in to be fixed and forgot about picking it up. We have no goddamn spare tire.”

Julia contemplated their options. She remembered seeing the junkyard and her optimism filtered through like sun rays through a darkening cloud.

“Well, you are in luck. We passed a junkyard back there remember? We can walk there, get a tire and we will be as good as new in a jiffy.”

Derrick was amazed how optimistic Julia was, and how she always saw a light at the end no matter how dim. He leaned over and kissed her firmly on the cheek. She turned her face and they locked lips. After a moment of intimacy, she pulled away gently and opened her door.

“Let’s go!” she beamed, eager for the walk. The air was crisp and the smell from the forest swirled thickly around her. She stood with her eyes closed inhaling deeply before opening them and taking a lingering moment to admire the beauty of it all. Dark strands of hair lightly whipped about her face, blown by the mild breeze carried by nature itself. It awestruck her into a mesmerized bliss.

Derrick put his right hand in hers and together they hiked along the shoulder taking in all the sights, colors and smells. A few feet ahead Derrick caught sight of bright pink and yellow flowers. He gently let go of Julia’s hand and walked faster to the patch. Kneeling he picked a bunch and handed them to her. She brought them to her nose and inhaled the perfume. Her smile radiated through Derrick like butterflies. There was something about the way she smiled that always took his breath away. His hand reached for hers and they interlocked and kissed tentatively, passionately. His lips pressed firmly against her full lips with such passion, love, and affection that she felt giddy.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered between kisses.

Nothing is what it seems

Derrick took Julia's hand in his again and they started walking. Every now and then they looked deeply into one another's eyes and wordlessly said *I love you*. Derrick looked ahead. The sun was slowly vanishing behind the trees. He gazed skyward briefly admiring the change of hues from the bright orange to an almost tangerine. It merged with the sky, like food coloring in a glass of water. The clouds seemed to glow as though they blushed at the warm sun touching them. Silhouettes of birds flew across the sky that was now magenta, and the sun was further down behind the trees. The mauve of the dusty pinkish sky intensified and soon the stars would be shining down on them.

Derrick removed his Phillies hat and ruffled up his dark hair before putting the hat back on.

"What's wrong?" Julia chirped in a singsong voice.

"Well, how about this, Babe? I'm a damn idiot."

"Why?"

"I didn't think to grab our backpacks."

"And?"

"Inside are our flashlights." He waved at their surroundings. "I don't like the idea of you walking out here in the dark. What if you trip or something?"

"You know you worry way too much, right?" Julia squeezed his hand. "We have enough light to get us to the junkyard. I'm sure if they are good people they will drive us back to our car and we won't need the flashlights."

Derrick returned her squeeze and found once again that he was admiring her optimism.

A few more feet ahead and the junkyard came into view. Julia could hear a release of air escape Derrick's mouth and she knew he was pleased that they made it before dark. When they got close enough to see, the first thing Derrick noticed was how odd it looked. A colossal sized gate of wrought iron with spikes at the top prevented anyone from entering. It looked like it opened electronically from the inside. He found it odd that a junkyard would have such security. He didn't think it would be a target for thieves. He hesitated a moment before pushing on the buzzer.

Julia snuggled her right side up against Derrick's left. No matter how optimistic she was, she didn't like the look of this junkyard. There was a large sign on the gate. It was rusted, but the warning was very readable; 'Beware of dogs.' Derrick was not bothered, but he knew Julia was deathly terrified of dogs.

He thought of how some businesses would advertise guard dogs yet have none. He wondered if this would be one of those places. He quickly found that wasn't the case here. Julia flinched, and Derrick could feel her whole body stiffen, when two Rottweilers rushed up to the gate barking ferociously. A moment later a guy wearing a greyish off-green jacket, long and dragging along the dusty ground, appeared. The front of the jacket was smeared with oil stains and something that looked like wine. Behind him was a giant of a man at least 6'9" by the looks of him. The taller one was wearing a pair of overalls that were equally as stained as the first guy's attire. Both of them looked to be in their 30's. When they smiled they showed missing teeth that grossed Julia out, making her feel even more uncomfortable.

"Rednecks,'" she whispered.

"What can we do for you fine looking folk?" the first guy asked, as his eyes fixated on Julia's chest. His voice was gritty and carried a sardonic tone.

"Do you have a tire that would fit a 2015 SUV Audi?"

Both of the men chuckled under their breath. Derrick sneered at them and turned to leave, holding tighter to Julia's hand.

"Come on back here mister. We may not have the tire you need, but we can call a tow for you. Where is your car?"

"You have a working phone?"

"Well, of course we do," he said grinning wider and grossing Julia out more.

Her eyes diverted to the dogs then back to the men. The one in overalls kept playing with his pockets. He would dip his hands in and out of them as if he were fishing for dog treats.

"Will you call for a tow truck?"

"We can, but it's best if you speak to the guy since you know where your car is."

Derrick felt a little reassured when he touched the metal of his gun.

"You mind putting the dogs away? My wife is allergic."

“Allergic? You don’t say?”

Derrick eyed him closely while the other guy in overalls whistled and both the dogs healed next to him. He grabbed their collars and walked away. Julia and Derrick watched as the man and dogs entered a small office trailer. When they were inside, and the door was shut, the guy in front of them pulled a cracked, dirty stained remote from his pant pocket. With a grimy large hand, he pushed one of the two buttons and the gate screeched open. The ground was gravel but after a few yards it turned to dusty brown dirt.

Derrick and Julia followed the man to the main construction trailer. When they stepped inside the smell hit them hard. Julia thought it stunk of rotten food and death. She’d smelled something similar when she visited a pig farm years ago. The administrative area had a chipped and badly stained desk. Scattered papers layered the top like a child’s toy box. On top of that was an old, green greasy looking push button phone. To the right of the desk was a watercooler. The water inside had floating bits of what looked like clumps of oil.

“Help yourself to the water, and why not take a load off them feet.” The man offered, gesturing to the watercooler and a chair. Julia declined to drink screwing up her face unable to hide her disgust, and flatly refused to sit in the filthy chair no matter how much she needed to get off her feet.

“There’s the phone,” the toothless man said with the wave of a hand.

Derrick picked it up off the receiver and put it to his ear. Julia squirmed at the thought of touching the phone. She made a mental note to remind Derrick to sanitize his hands afterward. She quickly noticed the frustrated look spreading across Derrick’s face and the smirk on the scummy man that stood too close for her liking. She moved back a foot, but did not take her eyes off him.

Derrick listened for the dial tone, but there was none. He immediately pushed the buttons on the phone’s receiver to see if he could get one.

“There’s no dial tone.”

“It was working yesterday. You must of broke it. Being a city slicker like yourself the phone clearly doesn’t like being touched by you,” the man said in a joking tone, but his look reminded the young couple of one of his dogs, carnivorous.

Julia’s eyes darted straight to Derrick’s and he motioned toward her.

“Where you going fella?” he asked while stepping between Julia and Derrick.

“Step aside,” Derrick said through clenched teeth.

Julia reached her arm out trying to grab hold of Derrick’s. Her mind filled with dread and she wondered what the other guy was doing outside. She could hear a noise, but wasn’t sure what it was.

“I am not going to ask you again,” Derrick warned.

When the louse didn’t move, Derrick fisted his right hand and swung it hard into the side of the man’s face. The man’s head whipped back, but he did not fall. He put his hands into his filthy jacket and pulled out a grimy stained hunting knife. He quickly backed into Julia forcefully grabbing her arm and pushed his body behind hers. He brought the knife to her throat with his right hand and his left held her in place.

“You shouldn’t have done that mister,” he said bitterly.

“Let her go or I will shoot you,” Derrick yelled and at the same time he grabbed his gun from his holster and aimed it right at the head of the toothless man.

The dogs instantly appeared at the door barking and growling. Julia could feel her knees wobbling and she looked to Derrick pleadingly. Before Derrick could pull the trigger, the man pushed Julia into him and slipped out the door laughing like a demented psycho. Derrick started to follow, but the dogs stood guard snarling with a ferocious bark that even had Derrick startled. He shut the door quickly and made sure Julia was okay while he padded to the only window in the trailer.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked while pulling back the curtain. He could make out the dogs and he could see the shadows of the two men. Julia walked over to the phone and traced the cord to the wall where she saw it had been ripped from the wall-jack.

“I will be now that ugly is gone. Look over here, Hon. No wonder the phone didn’t work.”

Derrick took a look. He fumed at the very notion he got them into this predicament.

“Those rednecks must have a car. I say we highjack their wheels,” he said handing Julia his gun.

“Hon, I’d prefer one of the derringers.”

“That’s right, you like the smaller ones.” Derrick bent down and unhooked his right ankle holster and removed the gun, handing it to Julia.

Julia trusted in his judgement when it came to guns. He was an expert on them, having been an armed security guard for thirteen years. She was thankful she took the time to train with him. She no longer felt uneasy around guns. She took it from his hand and hugged him tightly. She nearly jumped out of his embrace when the idiot outside started shouting at them.

"Come out little piggies. It's hunting time!" He shouted it three times in an insane tone that had Julia's gooseflesh prickle at her like miniature daggers.

"Do you think he's for real?" She quavered and gently rubbed her baby bump.

Derrick witnessed the deep worry that penetrated her eyes like a fresh tattoo. Feeling like a failed husband for getting them into this mess, he vowed to do everything to get them out of it.

"I do, Babes. I do. They had ample time to shoot the both of us and they didn't."

"What kind of sick shits do this? We aren't animals," Julia said loud enough for the men outside to hear her.

"Little piggies... Come out... Come out!"

"What are we going to do Derrick?"

"They may think they have us." Derrick said with a confidence he hoped would spill over onto Julia. He nodded toward their guns. "We will get the jump on them. They won't know what the fuck hit them. I'm not about to let anything happen to you or the baby. You have my word." He planted a delicate kiss on both of her cheeks and one on her belly.

"Come out...Come out! Little Pigs!"

Julia jumped at the sadistic tone of the toothless man and found herself clinging to Derrick.

"They are going to kill us, aren't they?"

"I won't let them touch you or the baby. I promise you."

"You can't promise that. We are trapped in here. They are out there with the 'jump' on us!"

"You are forgetting one thing. They want us alive."

"Why?"

"It is part of the thrill for those low life scums. They need us alive, so they have something to chase."

"What sick twisted freaks are they?"

“Come out now! Or we burn you in there,” the ugly man called furiously from behind the door.

Reassuring her was proving to be difficult when he himself felt a little unsure of what the two idiots outside had planned. He stood upright and made his way to the door keeping Julia behind him. He could feel her hot breath across the back of his neck. She breathed hard and fast causing Derrick’s stress level to skyrocket. He absentmindedly toyed with his Phillies hat and paused at the door.

“Hon, do you think they would really burn us alive?”

“I don’t want to risk it. Follow my lead... we will be alright.”

“What about the dogs?”

“I hope they will be holding them back. If I am reading this right, they will probably give us a head start and then send the mutts out to track us down. That is when we will get them,” he whispered.

Julia trusted Derrick more than she trusted herself. His intelligence and expertise in security allowed her that wiggle room to feel safe. She thought back to the many months he took her shooting. Every target and at different ranges he had hit it a perfect bullseye each time. Teaching her to do the same. She reminded herself of that when Derrick opened the door.

A set of flood lights shone on them blinding them momentarily. Julia stayed ducked down behind Derrick’s back, away from the harsh lights, while he shielded his vision with the back of his right arm. He could just make out the two men as he squinted through the intense light. The one in overalls, who hadn’t said a word since they arrived, was holding the dogs. He could tell it was an effort to control the beasts. The guy’s arms were bulging at the bicep and he was panting. The strong muscular dogs were growling and anxious to get at their prey. They were the real threat. Derrick and Julia wouldn’t be able to outrun them.

“Get your asses out here,” the toothless man hollered as he pointed toward the west in the junkyard. “I’ll give you ten minutes then these here hungry mutts are coming for you. Go on... Get!” he ordered in his malicious tone.

Julia looked the way the goon had pointed. The junkyard was now lit with multiple flood lights like a football stadium. It helped to calm her nerves knowing that they would have light to make their escape. She shivered when the dogs picked up the eagerness in their master’s voice and started to howl. She was sure they had played this game before. The dirt

under there sizable paws scattered as they fought at the larger man trying to control them. She gripped tightly to Derrick's back utterly terrified.

Derrick reached his right hand behind him and grabbed hold of Julia's hand. He skirted out the door leading her west. He needed to find somewhere they could make a stand. They made their way into the piles of wrecked cars, dodging in and out as fast as he could get Julia to move. He spied a couple of single cars and had an idea. He sprinted toward them with Julia in tow.

"I'm sorry, babe, you aren't going to like this part...

"What, Derrick, just tell me?"

"I need to mask our scents. With something like gas or oil."

"You're right I don't like it."

Derrick looked around and spied a rusted red can. He reached over and grabbed it and shook it. Liquid sloshed in it. He opened it and took a sniff, confirming it was motor oil.

"Close your eyes, sweetie and hold your breath. I know this sucks, but it will keep the dogs from scenting you."

Julia looked at him with wide fearful eyes. "You don't intend to pour whatever is in there over me, do you?"

"Hon, I have to, now please close your eyes." Julia closed her eyes tightly, and Derrick could see her jaw clench in anticipation of the dunking he was about to give her. He poured some down her back, then he repeated it down her front. She put her hands to her face accidently smearing it across her cheeks, forehead and chin area. Derrick smudged at it making it spread out more, carefully keeping it away from her eyes. Using his tee shirt sleeve, he wiped her eyes and mouth clear.

"Oh my God, that's cold and it smells. Derrick it really stinks."

"I'm sorry, but it had to be done."

Derrick used the remaining oil and smothered his chest, arms and neck with it. He led Julia to a car and put her into the backseat. Before getting himself into the car he cleaned the dirt along the windows, just enough so he could see out.

"Get down babe. I hear the dogs."

Julia lay across the backseat quivering in fear. Derrick shuffled lower in the passenger seat and watched like an eagle waiting for a fish. He could hear Julia's deep breathing and it worried him. The dogs walked past the car twice, then unexpectedly they returned sniffing by the back door.

Julia cupped her mouth and held her breath. She strained to listen and furtively wished the dogs away.

Derrick couldn't get a clear shot and figured it would be better to separate the dogs. He watched the goliath goon approach the car. Automatically he held his gun ready and waited. The dogs went around the entire car sniffing and digging up the dirt aggressively. They wandered off to another car and then even further away. The huge man followed his dogs loyally, while swinging a rifle around as if it were a toy. Derrick relaxed when they were out of sight, getting himself and Julia out of the car quickly.

"Are you sure they have gone?" Julie asked in a dry choke of a voice.

"Yeah... for now."

"Can you give me a rag? I gotta get some of this stuff off me."

Derrick gave the surrounding area a look over and found a couple of rags.

"Close your eyes, sweetie." When Julia closed her eyes, Derrick wiped away the oil from her face. He gave her a rag and she started to wipe down her arms and chest.

"God this stuff stinks worse than horse shit," she said in protest.

When she finished Derrick grabbed her hand. "This way. Let's go, Hon."

They rounded a passageway and ended up on a narrow path with mangled up cars on either side like the lines of unkempt hedges.

"What if we got higher, up there," Julia suggested and pointed to a pile of cars stacked on top of one another.

"It was my plan to do that, but not that pile. It's too unstable for you and the baby." He looked over his shoulder when he heard distant snarling and the rush of feet on the ground.

"Quickly, Babes. We have to move now." He practically dragged her down the narrow path which led to an opening with three more paths. Derrick didn't hesitate, going straight down the middle. There were dumpsters there which seemed oddly placed. The smell near them was like he'd gone from the junkyard and right into the pit of a raw sewage lake. He held his breath as best he could and continued forward. He could hear Julia's labored breathing, like she'd become an asthmatic. He needed to find her a place to rest. Desperately, he scanned the area.

He turned to her and grimly spoke. "Sorry, Hon. It's into the dumpster for you. I'll take on the dogs first. They're headed back our way. Quickly

now."

Julia didn't argue, she was exhausted. Derrick put his gun on the ground and gave her a hand up. She grabbed hold of the side of the dumpster and he pushed her up higher until she could pull herself over without hurting the baby. He heard her fall into something that sounded wet.

"What was that?" he called out in a stage whisper.

When Julia landed, she thought at first she had fallen onto a pile of wet rotten food. Until she see's an eyeball plastered across the cheek of what was once a man. She screamed and tried to climb out. Each time she tried to reach for the top of the bin she'd fall back in splashing up foul smelling liquid. She could feel the hands of victims near her feet and panicked when it felt like they were grabbing at her ankles. She grabbed at her jeans pocket and pulled out the gun only to drop it. She looked right into the empty eye sockets of what was left of someone. She couldn't even tell if it was male or female. To her right she knocked into a decomposing head that loosely bobbed in the mixture of blood, rotting bodies and trapped rain water.

A cloud of flies buzzed around her, and an arm floated nearby with flesh rotting on the bone. Wriggling from an eye were multiple maggots, squirming hungrily for raw flesh. Mixed in the gore and torn clothing she noticed a twisted hand with two missing fingers, fused to a stirring wheel. She felt the squishy bits of skin and busted bones that pricked at her delicate skin. Tangling around her arms were stringy veins, rotted arteries and decaying muscles. There had to be at least four bodies in the dumpster. Instantly her stomach sunk, and her mouth filled with rancid bile.

"Derrick!" she screamed desperately trying to jump high enough to reach the edge of the bin. She had no traction. Everything was being mulched under her feet and the sound of snapping bones, was like walking over shattered glass.

Derrick searched for something to stand on and found a tire. He rolled it over. When he stood on it. After two frantic attempts he managed to reach his hand over the top.

"Grab my hand," she yelled. "Get me out of here!"

"I'm trying, Babe. I'm fucking trying."

Derrick could hear the dogs but had no time to stop them. They pounced on him from behind knocking him off his perch. A loud menacing growl came from behind Derrick. He turned over to see both of the dogs. Their hackles were raised in defense as they bared a set of razor sharp teeth.

Together they stood low to the ground so their shoulder blades protruded showing sizeable muscles. Derrick rolled toward his gun that he'd left near the dumpster. Snatching it in his hand he didn't even blink. He shot one of them in the head. It gave off a series of high pitched whimpers before it fell down never to move again. Derrick stood up and faced the other dog head on. The second dog licked at the bleeding dogs wound and then aggressively rushed at Derrick.

He pulled the trigger a second time but missed as the dog jumped up and pushed Derrick over. His gun went flying and landed a few feet from him. Now in a crocodile like roll he fought for his life. He felt the bites as the dog savagely tore at his arm. The herculean dog went for his throat, but Derrick pushed his arm into the open mouth of the dog. The scrapes from its razor teeth gashed against Derrick's flesh like a thousand knifes were stabbing him all at once.

Derrick gritted his teeth and pulled at the dog with his right hand while his left was still stuck in the dog's maw like a bear trap. He had matted, bloody fur in his fingers, and it still didn't budge. He kicked out hard and fast, catching the dog in the stomach. It went reeling but came back even more forcefully. It bit down on Derrick's left arm again, locking its powerful jaws around his flesh. Blood spewed through the dog's mouth and down his arm.

He looked around for something he could use to pry the dog's maw off of him. The pain shot up his arm. He fisted his right hand and pounded the dog hard on the muzzle, three times, until the mutt finally let go. Derrick pulled his knees up hard catching the dog in the throat. It let out a horrendous yelp. He didn't have the time to get back up, and frantically moved toward his gun. He grabbed it and rolled over onto his back, shooting the dog as it pounced on him. The dog collapsed on top of Derrick saturating him with its gore. He pushed the beast off, got up and made his way to the dumpster.

Determined, and fueled by raged, he stood on the tire, grabbed the side of the dumpster and held on with his mangled bleeding left hand pushing all of his weight into the side and pulling himself up higher. He reached over with his right and after a few attempts Julia finally grabbed onto his hand and he helped her up and over.

"What is that shit all over you?"

"Eyes. Flesh. Guts."

“What?”

“God damned human remains.”

“Jesus Christ. Those sick bastards.”

“I lost the gun, Hon. I went to use it in the dumpster and it slipped out of my hand, and I wasn’t going to dive for it in that muck. I’m not getting into any more of those dumpsters! I’d rather face the dogs.”

“Don’t worry, the dogs are dead.” Derrick waved a hand behind him toward the two animals. “I’m going to kill those pricks...” he said with determination as he ripped off his shirtsleeve and started to tie it around his bleeding arm. Julia grabbed at the cloth to help.

“We gotta hurry, those men will have heard the gun shots and...”

“Yes, let’s go. You can fiddle with my arm later.”

He had just got a few feet in front when he heard hurried steps and roughly pulled Julia behind some cars. She automatically ducked down and had to pull on Derrick’s pant leg to get him to do the same. She knew to be quiet though she felt like the man would hear her heart beating. She held her breath and watched the man as he came into their line of sight.

When he saw his dogs dead, he let out some kind of muffled, guttural wailing sound before falling to his knees and grabbing at his dead dogs. He picked them up and laid them across his lap, sobbing while murmuring something incomprehensible. He opened his mouth as if to scream but all that came out was more of the muffled wail.

Derrick thought about just shooting the simpleton but something inside of him took pity upon the broken man. Julia pulled on Derrick’s hand trying to get him to move. He gave Julia a fleeting look and then dragged her behind some other cars until they had cleared the path from the man’s view. Derrick wondered where the toothless one was as he broke into a sprint practically dragging Julia with him. The path he ended up on led them to more dumpsters.

“Wait here, Babe. I need to check something out,” Derrick cautioned, then he held his breath, hoping that Julia didn’t see.

“What on earth are you doing?” Julia’s heart raced. She felt sick and sticky. The smell of the oil and decomposing bodies she had been drenched in had her dry reaching. She hadn’t had time to check on Derrick’s wounds and noticed as he climbed a car how much he was bleeding.

He got one car high and could see down, instantly he wished he hadn’t looked into the dumpsters. He could make out a woman, or what was left of

her. It was what she held onto that shocked him. A toddler with its bare back showing large deep cuts that had maggots spilling out of it. The woman holding the child bore a face of chilled terror. She was missing an eye, and something stuck out of her throat. Derrick looked harder and almost fell off the car as vomit raced up his throat. Her carotid artery had been wrapped around her throat. He closed his eyes and swallowed down the bile. When he opened them, he looked into the next dumpster. A couple entombed in an entangled hug. They looked like decomposing beached whales that had been slaughtered and cut wide open with their intestines pulled out and floating nearby like swollen eels.

Derrick could feel his flesh crawl and found his mind thinking about Julia and his unborn child. The image of the woman he saw played heavily across his vision like a movie on repeat. He jumped down off the car and embraced Julia.

"What is it?"

"I don't think you want to know. Let's keep moving."

"Your arm, it's bleeding too much. Let me tie this on it." Julia tore the sleeve from her own blouse this time and tied it around his arm as tightly as she could.

They made it another 300 yards when Derrick stopped. "I'm going to get you up here." The cars overlapped one another making crude steps Julia could use. "I want you up as high as you can go. If the car door will open, I want you to get into that top car and hide in the backseat."

"Okay." She looked seriously at him. "Tell me what was in the other dumpsters."

"Pretty much more of what you landed in. We don't have time now, just move, Babes."

Julia started to climb with Derrick's help. He stayed on the fourth overlapped car and watched her as she climbed five more. The very top car was an orange Datsun in reasonable shape. He watched as she tried the doors, which seemed stuck and his heart beat faster.

"Pull them hard," he called up to her trying to keep his voice down enough not to draw attention to them.

Julia nodded. Pulling harder she managed to get the back door open. She gave Derrick the thumps up, then slipped into the back and closed the door. When she was out of sight Derrick sighed with relief and climbed

down. He made his way to the left and hid behind some cars. He could hear footsteps fast approaching.

It wasn't long before the larger of the two walked into view. Derrick observed for a moment. He aimed at the man's legs and fired. His aim was straight. He hit the man in both of his legs just below the knees using his second derringer. The one he had given Julia was long gone, now this one was out of ammo. Placing it back into his ankle holster he then quickly unclipped his revolver from his shoulder and checked his pockets for extra bullets. The man opened his mouth and instead of a powerful scream he only let out the same lament as they heard him make over the dogs dead bodies. Derrick waited ten minutes, but the other guy was nowhere to be seen. He made the decision and came out of hiding to go look for him. He ignored the big man writhing on the ground in obvious pain and went to check on Julia first. He didn't want to give away his position by yelling, so he climbed all the way to the top and felt the cars beneath him move. When he reached the Datsun, he opened the door frightening Julia.

"It's me, Babe. It's me.'

"Sorry..."

"It's okay, I didn't mean to scare you. I got the overall wearing weirdo, and now I'm going on the hunt for the other."

"Good, the sooner you get the other dirt bag the sooner we can get the hell out of here. And Derrick, we are going *home!"*

"You have my word on that. I want you to stay here. You are safer up here. As soon as I get that prick I'm coming back for you."

Julia tried to smile, but for the first time in her twenty-eight years she wasn't optimistic. He leaned in and gave her a kiss then backed out of the car closing the door and descended as quietly and carefully as he could.

Before taking off he looked over the man he'd shot in the legs. Blood had pooled under him and he was squirming around in evident pain. What struck Derrick the hardest was the man's contempt for him. He bore a hole with his glare, and though he could not speak, Derrick imagined him to be spitting verbal venom.

Curiosity and anger got the better of Derrick. He pulled the man's head back hard and forced his mouth open. The man used his strong arms and applied a ton of pressure to Derrick's, causing his arm to bleed more. He pushed through the pain and managed to pry the man's mouth open. He had

a quick look and then let go fast, now understanding why he didn't talk. He had no tongue.

"So, you aren't a retard!" he whispered into the man's ear.

The man bit at the air like a rabid dog. Spittle collected in his gob and spilled over like an over flowing tub. Derrick raised his gun hand and hit the man hard upside the head to knock him out. He wasn't about to take any chances and have the man give away Julia's location. It took three hits dead across the back of the man's head before he was knocked clean out.

"Tough bastard," Derrick muttered, as he took a good look around before heading off to find the other killer.

Derrick looked for a working car on the way and kept his ears on full alert. He had a bad feeling about the toothless man. He noticed that the parameter of the junkyard was reinforced with razor wire on top of high fences. Derrick continued to search, but his thoughts were on Julia and he prayed she'd stay put. Everywhere he looked was tottering piles of derelict cars. A graveyard of rusting carcasses heaped one on top of the other.

He jumped when he heard gunfire over his head and instantly ran for cover. Crouching down behind a pile of cars he gazed through the broken glass searching for the scumbag. The toothless man shot into the air as if to announce his approach. The shots from the shotgun cracked into the air as loud as thunder, but without the raw power of a storm. Derrick estimated the man was less than 300 meters away.

Unexpectedly, the shots changed from a shotgun to an automatic. His heart skipped. What kind of fire power did he have? Then silence returned far more thickly than it was before the shots. It was as if Derrick could hear only the busted cars moving ever so slightly like they were breathing.

Derrick stayed behind the cover of the cars and his gaze never shifted. The man finally started down the narrow path in full sight of him. He noticed the man had a swath of weapons. A fully stocked bandolier hung across his chest. He had a sawed-off shotgun in his left hand, while his right carried a modified submachine gun. Derrick also noticed the swinging grenades.

His mind ticked through a multitude of options for how to disable the guy. Once he decided on a plan, he quickly fell to his belly and crawled under the nearest car. The man's legs were right there. He aimed and fired three times. The man collapsed yelling a fit of curses that bounced off the cars in an earthshattering way.

As soon as Derrick saw him fall he jumped to his feet and slowly crept along the side of the car until he was at the trunk. He had moved only a few more feet before he saw the man pull out a grenade. Derrick dove for cover, but the explosion propelled him even further. Shrapnel bits from the blown-up car were sent flying into Derrick's back like arrows. He jostled forward hard and fell face first. What felt like minutes was only a few seconds. He staggered to his feet, blood was dribbling from his back. He pitched forward hitting the ground hard. When he turned to look at the man, he caught the sight of his raised arm and felt his heart drop when he realized the goon was throwing another grenade. Derrick pulled strength from depths he did not know he possessed. He scrambled to his feet and ran for cover, just making it behind a pile of rusty cars as the second grenade landed just shy of him. He wrapped his arms around his head.

When the dust had cleared, Derrick rushed further ahead, zigzagging back and forth between the rows and piles of cars. He circled back around. He wanted to see if the killer had any more grenades before advancing on him so, he purposely let the moron see him. When he did, he pulled out another grenade and chucked it at Derrick. This one went off to the left and landed on a heap of cars causing an avalanche. The tower of piled up cars spilled over with a horrific thudding noise as if a herd of elephants were stampeding by. When the dust settled, Derrick circled around again, this time there were no more grenades.

Instead the man had scooted himself into a sitting position and was now using the submachine gun. He yelled over the gunfire, but Derrick couldn't hear him. All Derrick had to do was wait him out and every now and then he'd show his face just enough to irritate the toothless man into wasting his precious ammunition.

"Come out of hiding you piece of shit."

Again, Derrick could not hear him over the gunfire. He waited it out and when he had the chance he shot back, getting the man in the stomach. All Derrick could see was the dead bodies in the dumpsters. It flicked a switch internally and he ignored his worry about serving time for killing a man. He'd go back and kill the other man, convincing himself that neither killer had the right to live. He ignored the voices in his head and kept on shooting. He reloaded his revolver and fired non-stop filling the man with bullets. A geyser of gore sprinkled into the air and the sonofabitch still refused to stop shooting back. The toothless man's aim was off considerably and when he

opened his mouth to shout obscenities all that spilled out was a flood of gore. Derrick knew it was only a matter of time before he'd bleed out and die.

He sat back and waited.

The dirt bag died twenty minutes later. The death had been agonizingly slow, but probably fully deserving considering what Derrick and Julia had found in the dumpsters. He was just thankful it was finally over. He walked up to the yokel and kicked him ensuring he was dead. Satisfied, he started back to where he'd left Julia. Without remorse, he shot the other unconscious man in the head.

Satisfied he was dead he climbed the cars and retrieved Julia from her hiding place. She saw the dead man and decided not to question Derrick. In the back of her mind, she knew he'd done the right thing regardless of what the law would say. It was self-defense. That was all that mattered. She told herself.

Julia tried her best to extract the bits of metal stuck in Derrick's back but couldn't get to some. They were buried too deeply. She checked his other cuts and bruises. Her stomach felt queasy just looking at them.

"We have to get you to a doctor. You'll need stitches," she said with a dry irritated throat. She coughed a few times to clear it. "Are you going to be okay to drive?"

"I'll be fine," he reassured her. "You know I am tougher than I look. I'm more worried about you and the baby. Are you sure you're okay?" The look in his eyes of deep concern penetrated Julia in a way she'd never seen from him before. All she could think about was the baby and getting back home.

"I think I am. I'll probably be a lot happier once I have an ultrasound. I just want to make sure this baby is okay."

"I know, Babe. I know." Derrick sighed heavily holding Julia in a lingering hug. She was his everything and he was hers. He lightly kissed her forehead.

Together they searched for a vehicle. Half an hour later they found a very large hangar like the ones used for small domestic airplanes. Inside were several cars in varying stages of dismantlement. Julia searched the area and after a few minutes she found several sets of keys on a dirty table near the end of the hangar.

Derrick was checking the trunks for tires when he heard Julia rattling the keys. He looked up and smiled at her. He couldn't help but notice that

one of those cars had a toddler seat and a diaper bag in the back. He cast his mind to what he saw in the dumpster and instantly felt a searing heat rise to his scalp giving him a headache. The dreaded feeling of that car's owners being murdered and dumped into a dumpster nearly knocked him out cold. He popped open the trunk, took out the spare tire and rolled it to the one Julia was standing by twirling the keys indicating she had found a match.

"What is that in your other hand?" Derrick quizzed while he lifted the tire and put it straight into the backseat.

"I found the gate remote with the keys. Babe, it isn't all I found. There are driver's licenses and cell phones in crates over there." She pointed to the back of the building.

"I'd say those assholes have been doing this for sometime," Derrick said, as he held the door open for her. She gave a half smile and got into the car to wait for him. He got in and turned over the engine.

"Get us out of here."

He didn't need to be told. His urgency to leave was evident when he put his foot down and spun out of the hangar and headed straight for the gate. Julia pushed the button and the gate slid open. Derrick drove out fast. Neither of them looked back.

It seemed a short drive back to their car. He changed the tire in record time. Once he got Julia into their car, and comfortable, he put his foot to the floor and they left the junkyard behind.

It would be a lifetime before they could leave their memories behind.

The End

Grounders

Eleven

Jerome sat on the edge of what once was a towering building, now rendered to just rubble. He looked out toward where the city once thrived and reflected on what it once was. Now with the human population so drastically reduced, and the world beyond taken over by not just mother nature but by creatures, large swathes of critical human infrastructure collapsed. Roads, office blocks, buildings of all sizes were all consumed by mother nature. The threat of unattended nuclear power plants made this new world very bleak.

Without a doubt it was just a matter of time before the nuclear plants infected the world with radiation poisoning which would rise into the air and get into the water from the decaying power plants. Large areas surrounding the plants would become wastelands, while airborne pollution and irradiated water would be carried many miles away. The radiation poisoning would further decimate the remaining population. What little was left. Human extinction was on the rise, making survival more desperate.

With this came the savagery of humans as they fought over scarce clean water and safe havens. The creatures constantly devouring everything in their way. Jerome considered, as bad as those things were, at least they were predictable. It was the humans who became unpredictable. Those were the very ones that terrified him. He picked up a pebble and tossed it a few feet from him, watching as it vanished into a pothole. His mind filled with scenarios, the possibilities of a radiation leak and what would happen to the ones that survived the poisons. Would they die, or evolve? Mutating into something far more deadly. That question penetrated his mind in ways he never knew possible.

The monsters only came out during the day. No one knew how the grounders came to be. It'd been eleven years since they arrived. Jerome was twenty-nine when it began. He lost his entire family right in front of him. Those things moved fast. They weren't vampires or zombies. Yet they showed characteristics of both. They ate human flesh, drank their blood, and they were powerful. The exhibited such incredible speed and strength that few survivors called them 'Aliens' back in the day. Mostly due to the coloring of them. They appeared off white, almost like chalk skin, over bodies that were no bigger than three feet tall. Their heads were oblong with

no necks. Their arms had a row of deadly sharp fangs from fingertip to elbows. Their legs were human looking, but as powerful as elephants with the speed of cheetah's. Their torsos were like flat steel with no identifying gender. Whatever they were, they had become known as the 'grounders.'

Where they came from and how was irrelevant now. The only thing that mattered was staying alive. Even though Jerome was feeling less desire to do so. All he knew was he had to get away. The further he went from any nuclear plant area the better. His guilt drove him from the current group he had lived with. At forty-years of age, he suffered a form of PTSD brought on by the mere act of living in these times. He was forced to kill other humans in order to save his own life, or that of those he grouped with.

The murders, even though in self-defense, were crippling him. It was bad enough that his nights became days and days became nights. The fight proving to be endless was slowly but surely sending him into a depression. His group knew it, saw it, and tried to help him. There was too much death, and the fight with other humans who had taken it upon themselves to be rulers of a once thriving land.

To spare the anguish he was causing his group, he left and had been on his own for the past three years. Finding places to hide during the day was increasingly more difficult. Nature had taken over. Overgrowth of weeds, trees and grass had covered houses, buildings and the roads.

Searching for a place to rest Jerome came across an abandoned airport. The moss vines had crept up across the entire length of the main building and spread far and wide. Not even a single window could be seen, though someone had cleared a section where a door once gave access.

Jerome carefully made his way through knee high grass and cracked potholes hidden beneath. The air was dry and had a stale smell about it. Sunrise was fast approaching and if he didn't get somewhere soon he knew he'd be torn apart. He also knew a clear path meant a possible threat of rogue humans. Not all he met along his journey were, but the ones that he did come across that were, caused a fight and had him feeling more and more regretful. It was one thing to kill a creature but another to kill a human.

Slinging his rifle across his shoulder and hooking his thumb of his right hand under the strap he took quiet steps toward the door. He gave a fleeting look into the horizon and could see the sun peeking with the glow of distant fire. Five more minutes and he'd hear them coming. They made a rushing

sound like a school yard of children all running in different directions. Automatically his back shuddered at the thought of the ugly sound they made.

He gripped hold of the door handle and pulled back. It resisted. He tried it again this time and it creaked loudly in protest as it opened. His dark hazel eyes darted to the left and right, fearing the daylight. He tugged back the door a little more, enough to squeeze through. Once inside he closed the door and took a few deep breaths. With the dust that had been disturbed he let out a few coughs, swung his backpack down and fetched his flashlight. Staying by the door he shone the light ahead, then swung it to the left and right as he searched the interior. He couldn't see anything but rotting furniture and a growth of fungus infused foliage that had begun growing inside.

Jerome could feel his heart thud at the side of his neck. He picked up his backpack throwing it on his back. Tucking his shoulders downward he grabbed his rifle and held it out front with his right hand while his left lit the way. Rubble, debris, rebar, and foliage made for a noisy path. No matter where he stepped he stood on something that crunched, broke, rustled, and/or squeaked. Stopping every couple of feet and taking a look around, he could just make out he was standing in front of a counter where assistants once checked in baggage.

He let his mind travel back to picture it. He could hear laughter, and a mix of conversations, babies crying and toddlers racing away from stressed out parents. Jerome was shaken from that image when a real noise alerted him. He stood stark still looking at the area where the sound originated. Listening he could hear whispers. Distracted by the sound in front, he hadn't heard someone approaching from behind. He was knocked out cold.

When he came to he found himself tied down to a conveyor belt that once transported people's suitcases. He thought he was alone until he spotted someone standing with their back to him..

"Hello," he called out tentatively.

The person turned and made her way toward him. A man dressed in black jeans, and black shirt fell in beside her. Both of them looked angry.

"I don't want any trouble. I was just looking for a place to hide out till nightfall."

"Fella, we don't want any trouble either, but your weapons tell a different story," the woman said while inspecting Jerome's guns.

“They are for protection. You know what is out there.”

“Yes, we aren’t stupid, but someone with this amount of fire power could also be trouble. Take our food. Rape our women. Steal our weapons,” the tall man in black said angrily.

“I promise you I don’t want your food, women or your weapons. I am a drifter. I’m just passing through.”

“Well, until we know for sure you’re our prisoner,” the woman said threateningly.

“Really, and how do I know that you two aren’t going to rape me? Kill me? Or steal my weapons?”

The man and woman looked at each other before bursting into loud laughter. They thought better of that immediately and squashed it quickly. They knew that if they made too much noise the ‘grounders’ would come after them.

“Where you from?” the woman asked getting a little closer to Jerome.

“Vancouver.”

“How’d you get here?” the man questioned while he pulled at his beard.

“I walked. I ran. I drove when I could find a working car.”

“Where you headed?” The woman said a little less aggressively.

“Nowhere in particular. I honestly don’t know. Anywhere that is as far away from the nuclear plants as possible.”

“Why?” the woman asked curiously.

“Because with no one to man them they are going to have a meltdown. Look around you. You see what 11 years has done to the infrastructure right?”

“Of course, we aren’t blind. Do you really think the plants will collapse too?” the man questioned, his tone had lessened.

“Yes... Absolutely.” Jerome replied.

“Well, I think we are gonna be safe for another few years. Right?”

“Look I’m not a damn expert on the duration of time it takes for a plant to send out poisons, so I have no idea. Maybe you have time... maybe you don’t. What the hell do you two want anyway?”

“Like I said mister, we are just making sure you aren’t a threat to us.”

“What’s ya name fella?” the woman asked.

“Jerome and yours?”

“He’s Geoff and I’m April.”

“Married?”

April and Geoff again looked at each other and busted into a fit of giggles. They caught themselves and stopped harshly.

"She's my sister. You so much as look at her in a way I deem inappropriate and I'll cut off your nuts and feed them to you, we clear?"

Jerome nodded while his insides wanted to laugh at the two of them.

"Okay! You implied there is more of you, men, women, children. Where are they? Or is it just the two of you? What are you going to do with me? How would you like me to *prove* I'm not after anything other than a safe place to bed for the day?"

"You sure do ask a lot of questions for someone who's tied up," Geoff chided.

"Well, what else am I gonna do? Let you two idiots judge and assume rather than trust and think? You had the balls to knock me over the head, take my weapons and tie me the fuck down. So why not be a real fucking man and untie me and let me be on my way." Jerome shot spittle at them as he spoke and wriggled around trying to free himself.

"If you think for a single moment that we'd untie you after that outburst you are surely mistaken, mister." Geoff snapped.

April grabbed a hold of his arm and pulled him to the side, out of earshot from Jerome. "He seems innocent enough. I mean he is travelling alone. Just let him go! You always do this Geoff. You think you are so damn holier-than-thou. If you don't let him go I will."

"Why do you do this all the time?"

"Because brother, you are so damn hot headed and irrational. Once in your life you might want to trust someone. I have a feeling, a good feeling, that this guy isn't what you think he is."

Geoff looked at his sister and for a split second he could see his mother in her eyes. The way she looked sternly yet lovingly at him. He was torn. He didn't want to treat strays the way he did. He just felt so over protective of his sister and right at that moment he wasn't sure of anything. He turned when he heard Jerome speaking.

"I'm thirsty. At least let me have some water."

Geoff rolled his eyes and fetched a canteen of water from his backpack. He walked over to Jerome, held up the black colored canteen and tipped it. Water ran down Jerome's chin and collected across his chest.

"Hold it up higher," Jerome said in a softer voice.

Geoff held the canteen up and leaned in a bit to ensure it was getting into his mouth and when he did Jerome head-butted him hard enough that Geoff was knocked out.

"Untie me April and I'll be on my way."

April rushed to her brother's side and tears swelled and dripped down her dirty face.

"You killed him."

"No, he's just knocked out and I'm not going to say it again, untie me and I'll be on my way."

April felt Geoff's chest for a heartbeat. When she found it, she stood up and looked into Jerome's dark hazel eyes as if she was trying to see if she was right about him. Something in his face softened her and she found herself on his side, though she didn't want him knowing. She decided to play hard like how her brother taught her.

"I want you to promise me that you'll leave. Go away. Please," she begged. Her eyes never leaving his.

"Look April you two got the jump on me. I'd not have knocked him out had you not tied me the fuck up. I promise you I'll be out of your way, but I am staying here until nightfall. I can't go outside with those things out there. You can trust me. I'm on my fucking own. I *want* to be on my own. Just untie me for fucks sake."

April hesitated, her thoughts of being alone without her brother while the creatures were out there frightened her. But she didn't know Jerome and she was worried that the moment she untied him he'd attack her. She knew those where her brothers words, his conditioning of strangers rang through her mind and she suddenly found she was switching sides again. Confused about which was the greater evil, the one inside or outside? She retrieved a gun from her own backpack and held it firmly under Jerome's chin, pushing it hard enough to leave an indentation.

"I swear you lay one hand on me or my brother and I will blow your brains out."

Jerome blinked and nodded to indicate he understood. April untied his feet first, then his arms quickly. She stood a couple of feet back and had the gun pointed right at his chest.

Jerome rubbed at his wrists, slid off of the conveyer belt and stood stretching his long frame and cracking his spine with a twist of his hip. Not once did April move. Jerome noticed her hand shaking and let out a little

sniggering cackle. He approached her. She instinctively backed up a few steps and cautiously watched him, her finger on the trigger and her nerves dancing around her insides like bolts of lightning. Jerome grabbed his backpack, his guns, and he turned his back to walk away.

"I'm staying inside here for the day. If either of you come for me, I'll get the jump on you this time. Don't follow me. Leave me the fuck alone and I'll leave you alone." He didn't turn around for an answer, instead he shone his flashlight forward and found an exit out of that room. He found himself in a long wide hallway with more overgrown moss and vines covering sections of the floor and walls. He located some stairs and went up them, then decided he'd go up another flight and head to the other end of the building to be sure he was well away from April and Geoff. He kept going until he found an office, or what was left of an office. He entered, closed the door, and after searching the small area he was satisfied that it was secure enough for him to get some sleep.

The smell of mold was something he'd never get used to. It had eaten away at the timber and degraded the seals throughout the building. Leaks were evident and plenty of roaches scuttering around the ample cracks, and rats to make anyone's hair stand on end. For Jerome it was the flora and fauna inside the buildings that really annoyed him. Trying to find a place to bed was getting harder and harder. Plenty of plants reclaiming wooden structures, wheedling into hairline cracks through the exposed brick work and spreading tiny tendrils through once hardy building materials. A network of ever expanding veins.

Along with the assault of insect colonies and birds, some small animals were also taking up residency in the very places he and other survivors fled to. They added to the structural weaknesses as they chewed through internal studwork and ceiling joints until all the walls had little support to them and began to collapse. It was a forever expanding nightmare, that challenged Jerome immensely.

Using his flashlight he was able to see an area in the far right of the small office that was structurally intact and would be suitable for an area of slumber. He kicked aside some debris, glass, wood chips, degraded paper, and other bits and pieces, and took out his sleeping bag. He took the broken desk and pushed it to block the door. In his mind, if the imbecile siblings came looking for him, they would make enough noise to wake him before they had a chance to enter. With the security out of the way he climbed into

his sleeping bag, switched off the solar powered flashlight and closed his eyes.

Sleep didn't come easy for Jerome. His body and mind always fought with it. Unable to find sleep he lay there listening to the critters within the walls. The sound they made was enough to keep him awake. He wished he could find a working iPod. The noise of a recording of any type would drown out the insects and give him some real sleep. Without power he was never going to get an iPod working. He couldn't remember the last time he heard music. His mind attacked him with thoughts. He could see his wife Dawn in a yellow swimsuit swimming in their pool while his nine-year old twin sons played tennis together. The happy sounds of squealing and giggles touched a nerve deep in his mind. He tossed, turning aggressively in the sleeping bag with more visions assaulting him. This time he was being told by Dawn that his breakfast was ready. He watched himself entering the kitchen wearing a suit and tie, remembering his job as a SEO of Global Enterprises was paralyzing him with desire for it to be as it once was.

He blinked open his eyes quickly with the sound of scuttling. Switching on his flashlight and casting it around the room he watched three large rats fight over a dead sparrow. Sharing sleeping space with rodents churned his guts and the smell of dead things ate away at his very soul.

He switched off the flashlight and pulled up the hooded part of the sleeping bag, zipping it all the way so he was completely covered. The thought of any critters entering his sleeping bag as he slept completely grossed him out. He far preferred sleeping outdoors but since the grounders arrived, camping outdoors was a thing of the past. He had tried a treehouse once, but it didn't last more than an hour of daylight. Those things had the power to sniff out a live human being a mile away and if it wasn't for his group at the time he'd have been granulated into a human powder of nothingness. A large pit had been dug in case the treehouse didn't work. He was swiftly pulled into the pit and a lid made of spikes, tree branches, metal and rope, was pulled over and the creatures couldn't get in. They stayed there throughout daylight trying to gain access. It was to be Jerome's saving grace and his groups that those grounders did not know how to use their fanged hands. Once night fell the group climbed out and made haste for an indoor hideaway.

Jerome finally found sleep, though it was plagued with disturbing images of the monsters eviscerating the many people he'd been with over

the years.

Hunted

“Where the hell did that prick go?” Geoff asked gruffly.

“I let him go. He promised he’d leave us alone and so far he has lived up to that promise. You’ve been out for an hour and half. He is long gone.”

“Why the fuck did you untie him, Sis?”

“Because it was wrong to tie him up in the first place. We both knew he was on his own and by the looks of him, he’d been that way for a while. He was no threat to us.”

“He could have been, Sis. You don’t know. Hell, I don’t know. You were lucky this time. I’ve told you before, if anyone enters our home, we will deal with them in a way that disables them until we can be sure that they are okay.”

“I don’t like it, Geoff. We could have help with extra people that have wondered in here over the last five years. We could have had a fucking group by now. But you always convince me that we’re doing the right thing. I’m sick of it. I’m sick of having to live by your rules. You are my brother... Not my father! I am done with it all. You hear me. Done!” April fell to her knees sobbing.

Geoff put his right arm across her shoulder and patted her like a dog. He didn’t know how to show affection. He was nine years old when the world was ravished by the creatures and his sister was seven years old. Being the older, and only living relative left, Geoff took his responsibilities too far and became severely over protective of his sister.

“Are you hungry, Sis?” Geoff knelt next to April and smeared her cheeks with the sleeve of his shirt to rid them of the wetness that covered them. April looked into her brother’s eyes and for the first time she noticed how cold they were, void of life in a way. It saddened her, and she pushed out her bottom lip and let more tears flood her face. “Come on, Sis. It’ll be alright. I will try harder. I promise.”

April lifted her eyes back to meet his and she caught a glimpse of hope. She stood up and ran her hands down her sides as if to smooth out her clothing. She looked around for a moment before turning her eyes back to Geoff. “What is on the menu then?”

“Let me see.” He opened up his backpack and pulled out a few items. In the very bottom was a Tupperware container and inside of it was some raw

meat. He gathered some wood and made a circle then filled that with some other bits of smaller wood and started a fire. He pulled out the rack he made weeks ago and speared the meat with it. It stood up above the fire like a homemade spit. “Rabbit is what I got during the night last. I know you like rabbit,” He sarcastically said while manually turning the meat over. He smiled at April and she smiled back.

After they ate they both settled in for the day and slept. When they woke it was nightfall and safe to go outside.

“See if you can’t find something other than rabbit,” April said while cleaning one of her hand guns.

“I can do what I can. There isn’t much of anything out there these days.”

“Yeah, I get that,” April said, as she put one gun down and started on another.

Geoff left and she carried on cleaning her guns. Over the years they had managed to collect an arsenal of weapons. With the practice she had, with all of the weapons, her favorite ended up being a revolver. There was no name on it so she didn’t know what kind it was, but she found it fit snuggly in the palm of her hand and the trigger felt comfortable. She had good aim with it, unlike the rifles she’d tried over the years. She was unable to hit her targets with the bigger bulky rifles. She stuck with her revolver. She was so engrossed in her cleaning she hadn’t heard Jerome sneak up behind her and she jumped startled when he spoke.

“I saw your brother leaving. Why would he leave you here alone?”

“Hey, you said you were going. You promised me.” April swung her body around and held her gun pointed at Jerome’s chest.

“Fucking Hell woman, put that thing down before you blow a hole in my chest. I’m not here to damn well hurt you. I am leaving this godforsaken building. As I said, I saw your brother leaving, and I was making sure you were okay. Forgive me for being polite and giving a shit. I’ll be leaving now.” Jerome turned to leave when he felt a warm hand take his. He looked down and sighed.

“I’m sorry. I actually don’t know what to think and who to trust. You can stay for a bit if you like. I have coffee.”

“How the hell do you have coffee?” His mouth watered at the thought of it and he found himself unable to leave.

“We found a factory full of sealed instant coffee sachets. Come sit, have a cup with me.”

Jerome eagerly took the offer of coffee and immediately his saliva glands worked overtime at the mere thought of it. He was practically drooling while the water heated in a pan over the fire. When she handed him a cup he almost fell into a hypnotic state. It had been seven years, and he’d forgotten the taste, let alone the aroma and was instantly in euphoric blissfulness. He didn’t want to talk at that moment. All he cared to do was inhale the delicious scent and sip on the golden nectar of luscious grounded coffee beans.

It was the sudden crying for help from a woman in the distance that alerted both him and April. She put her cup down and craned her head toward the sound. Jerome downed his cup in several hard gulps almost burning his esophagus as he swallowed, but he didn’t care it was worth the scalding. He wasn’t going to leave it behind. If it was the last thing he drank it would be a good memory.

He abruptly stood and hastened toward the crying woman’s plea for help.

“I thought you and your brother were alone here?” he called out over his shoulder, as he hurried toward the sound.

“We are. She must of wandered in hurt,” April offered as she rushed to catch up with Jerome.

Three rooms down from where they were a woman in a torn dress was hunched over on her knees. They were unable to see her face. Jerome held up his hand and indicated for April to stop. She almost didn’t but something inside of her told her to listen to him. She stood perfectly still while her eyes drank in the surrounding area. Jerome advanced a little closer to the moaning woman.

“Hey lady, are you hurt?”

The woman barley lifted her head and glanced toward Jerome, then howled louder in pain. “Help me,” she said between yelps.

Jerome visually searched the area. There were plenty of places someone could be hiding. He’d been ambushed before, but not like this. He got closer and couldn’t see any blood or reason for the woman to be crying out.

“What’s wrong with you. What injuries have you got?”

She didn’t answer, instead she cried louder. Jerome felt a little uneasy and aware of his surroundings he got even closer. Nothing happened. He

was now a foot away from her. She was bellowing out in obvious pain. He reached for her and as he took hold of her shoulder a shower of bullets hailed from above. They were aiming at his feet, careful to miss the lady on the ground. Jerome yanked the lady to her feet quickly noting she wasn't hurt at all. He pulled his knife from its sheath at this hip and held it to her throat.

"Shot at me again and I slice her!"

The gunfire stopped and outstepped two men, one large, the other average. Both wore dirty camouflage pants and matching tops. They looked ex-military.

"Put your guns down and step into the middle of this room," ordered Jerome.

The two men dropped their guns and walked into the room. April had her gun pointed at one of the men. She'd work fast at pulling the trigger, if need be she would take them both out. She convinced herself that she could do it.

"What do you want?" Jerome questioned the men.

"Food. Weapons," the large man said in a deep dry voice.

"We don't have any to spare. I suggest you fuck off and take this bitch with you. Leave your weapons." When they didn't move, Jerome said with more force, "I said get the fuck out. Move it!" Jerome yelled while forcing the blade of his knife deeper into the woman's throat.

She let off a squeal and singled to the men to get out with her eyes. The men made steps toward the exit with Jerome following still holding the woman hostage. April hung back a few feet but followed with her gun aimed at the men.

They hadn't got far when the woman lifted up her right foot as if to walk forward, when she suddenly slammed her foot into the top of Jerome's. He automatically let her go and she rushed to the men. The large one charged at Jerome. April pulled the trigger and the other guy went down, but she couldn't get a shot off at the bigger guy. He was on Jerome tackling him to the floor. She fired her gun at the woman instead, getting her in the hip. The woman dropped to the floor holding her side.

April danced around trying to get the bigger man in her sights, but he was fast and both men were interlocked in a rolling fight on the floor. Jerome pushed the man back enough to punch him square in the chest. The

man puffed out a wounded sound and then coiled his hands into fists and came back at Jerome with the force of a wild bull.

Jerome dodged the big man's fists until he was suddenly picked up and squeezed like a wrestler does to his opponent. Jerome used every trick he knew. He elbowed the man hard enough to be let go. They stumbled apart for a brief second to catch their breaths before diving back at each other. The big man's eyes narrowed in determination. In an instant, Jerome caught the musty blue eyes of the man widened as he tilted his head back and slammed it forcefully into Jerome's. Stars burst in his vision, but he was able to shake it off while grabbing the big man and tumbling through a wall. Jerome got up quickly and used his feet to send a barrage of kicks to the man as he lay on the ground.

"Is that all you got?" the hulking sized man spat and smirked, as he stood up and made a growling sound at Jerome before making a grab at him again.

Jerome's fist connected with the man's jaw and he could feel the strength in the man's face. It was like hitting a concrete wall. Suddenly Jerome was being picked up and body slammed into the rotting floor boards hard enough that they both fell through to the next level. Winded they both winced at the pain in their backs. A few seconds past and they both got back up ready for more.

The man threw his body weight behind his next punch and it caught Jerome's jaw with such force that blood pooled in his mouth. He spat a glob of gore out and erupted a hail of fisted punches at the large man's face. With his speed he was able to continue knocking him backward. Jerome could see several nails sticking out of the wall directly behind the giant man and forced himself to punch faster and harder. Muscling the man to go backward. With his own two hands he grasped the head of the huge man and brought his knee cap up to his nose. There was a blunt crack. Crimson leaked from both nostrils and the pain was evident in the man's face. Jerome kept going, pushing, punching, and kicking until he had the man inches from the wall. With one final forceful kick the large man fell backward impaling himself on the nine-inch rusty nails. He screamed out something so blood curdling it made Jerome grimace. While his body was pinned on the wall Jerome repeated a series of punches into the man's stomach, chest and face until he stilled. When he moved no more Jerome

finally stopped and took in several large gasps of air. Filling his lungs never felt so good.

"Hey, are you okay down there?" April called out.

Jerome looked up and realized just how far he'd fallen when the floor gave way. He waved up his hand in acknowledgement and then told April he was going around to get back up to her.

When he got there he found the other guy dead and the woman was bleeding out. She'd die if they didn't help her. He looked at her and she gave him a vehement scowl. He didn't care enough to save her, neither did April. He took his knife and ended her swiftly. It was the humane thing to do.

He and April went back to wait for Geoff to return.

April noted that the night had ended. The sun was coming up and there was no sign of her brother anywhere. She couldn't believe that they had talked for so many hours. The thought of her brother hadn't concerned her until she saw the flicker of daylight filter through the cracks in the decaying building.

"We have to go look for him," she pleaded.

"It is too dangerous to go out during the day. You know that?"

"Please... I don't want to be alone. He is all I have. We have to go find him. If you won't come with me, I'll go on my own." April advanced toward the exit.

Jerome got in her way and stopped her.

"Let me go!" she yelled.

"You aren't thinking. Look, let us wait another hour and if he has not returned by then I will go and see if I can find him, okay?"

April walked back to the fire pit and sat herself down. With a heavy sigh she cupped her hands to her face and cried solidly. Jerome was feeling unsure of everything. He didn't want to be involved. He told himself he should have left when he intended. Three years on his own with no one but himself to talk to. This made up for it all. He had spent time meant to be searching out for another place to stay by talking constantly with April. They had laughed, and he learned a lot about her and her about him.

He made himself another cup of coffee and sat opposite April. She occasionally looked up and fixed her eyes on his, then she'd lower her head back to her knees. Jerome tried to make conversation with her a few times, but she wasn't willing to talk. The fear of losing her brother consumed her.

Jerome knew if he didn't find her brother that she'd stupidly go looking for him. Helplessly he gathered his backpack and took extra weapons from her.

"You know this is a suicidal mission, right?"

"Yes, I know. I also know I won't survive without my brother," April spoke in a mere whisper.

Jerome said no more. He pulled out a jar of sour crude oil from his backpack and smothered it across his arms, face, and over the top of his pants and shirt. April gave him a queer look, while holding her nose from the stench of rotten eggs.

"What is that for?" She pointed to the oil.

"It is crude oil contaminated with high levels of sulfur. It somehow helps detour my scent making it harder for them to find me. It gives me a chance."

"It really stinks. How did you figure out that this would work?"

"Look I could sit here all day explaining how, but I thought you wanted me to find your brother?"

"I do... Sorry. Yes, please go find him."

Jerome put the lid on the jar and stored the oil back in his backpack. He put his backpack on first then swung a rifle over his left shoulder and another over his right. He had two hand guns holstered to each hip and a knife in its sheath and another tucked into each sock of his boots. He made his way out and momentarily enjoyed the warmth of the sun.

His eyes searched the surrounding areas and he noticed a vehicle that wasn't there the morning he arrived. He knew it was the thugs that he fought with. It was a working vehicle, but he didn't want to draw attention to himself with the sound of the engine so he opted to go on foot. He carefully looked at where the grass, weeds and other foliage had been disturbed and followed it.

Twenty minutes had passed, and he seemed no closer to finding Geoff than he had been when he started. Frustrated, he stopped to take a sip of water from his canteen. In the distance he could hear the creatures. Their ugly sound always seemed to infiltrate his head and brought on headaches. He could feel one starting even now. After the brief stop, he readied his rifle and marched on. Following the path of trodden weeds and shrubbery, he came into an opening where concrete was now hidden beneath heavy foliage. He abruptly stopped. The noise was louder. He was getting closer to

the grounders. He pulled out the oil jar and slathered on more. Returned the jar to his backpack and continued on at a slower pace.

His eyes searched for Geoff and where he might be hiding. Shaking his head, he couldn't imagine him surviving out here at all. And for a moment he thought about turning around and going back to the abandoned airport to tell April that he couldn't find her brother. But something kept him going, he wasn't sure what, or why he felt obligated. Especially, since both her and her brother held him hostage for a few hours. Frustrated, angry, and hungry... he kept going.

Jerome had reached a section of overgrown trees. Several fallen logs littered the area. The trail was growing cold. He hesitated and wondered which way the man had gone. With no indication of path anywhere, he was about to turn and go back when something from above fell on his bald head. It was a tiny twig. He looked up and there, perched up high, was Geoff. Jerome signaled for him to get down. While Geoff climbed down Jerome got out his jar of oil. Handed it to Geoff and indicated he should put it on. Geoff gave a strange look but went and lathered up his body and clothing with the oil. He then followed Jerome and they headed back to the airport.

However, it wasn't long before Jerome came to an abrupt halt. Geoff didn't have to ask why. He felt the ground beneath his feet vibrate, following the sound of rushing feet. The creatures always hunted in packs. He held his breath and prayed to God that the oil would do as he assumed it was meant to. To his horror, he watched the grounders rush at them, his eyes grew wide then he squinted them tightly closed. He was frozen to the spot anticipating their attack. All the attacks on survivors he had witnessed over the years came flooding into this mind. He prayed hard. Jerome didn't move. He too stood perfectly still and held his breath. In the distance he could see two men, they were rushing for a place to hide when the creatures got wind of their scent.

A gush of wind swirled around Geoff and Jerome as the grounders raced past with hungry vicious jaws snapping as they ran. Moments later they were on the two men scraping, scalping, and sucking the life from them. In the air splatters of gore shot up and out like a ruptured garden fountain. The nascent roar fills the air and turns Jerome's skin icy. That is when the adrenaline hit such a fever pitch that 'freeze' wasn't going to cut it anymore. He gave Geoff the 'go' look and took off toward the airport. His legs exploded into action. The grounders were already looking for new live

bodies to annihilate and it was going to be only a matter of seconds before they would be sniffed out.

Geoff fled forward with the footfalls and quaking of the hunting pack reverberating under his boots. He prayed the grounders didn't smell or hear them.

Jerome abruptly halted and raised his index finger to his lips to hush Geoff. Both of them breathed heavily but as quietly as possible. A street that was once alive with traffic was crawling with grounders.

They both saw a family of five in the distance. They were hiding in a SUV when one of them sneezed giving away their location. The grounders were on the car like vultures on carrion.

Movement in the car sent the creatures into a frenzy of ferocity. The vehicle was being overrun by the monsters. Jerome and Geoff could no longer even see the car, it was covered with the creatures. All they could hear was the muffled screams of the family inside. The grounders savagely stabbed at the car windows with their fanged hands. The windows shattered, and each body was pulled out and attacked in such barbaric ways that it was hard for Jerome to watch.

Geoff was struggling to keep the bile down as he could feel his stomach acid stick to the back of his throat making him want to throw up even more. The grounders feasted, sucked and clawed apart the family of five. The geyser of gore spread across the car and overgrown weeds. Geoff and Jerome stayed for half an hour as still and silent as a steel rod, their eyes unable to look away or even shed a tear.

Jerome could feel the oil starting to dry up and knew he had to reapply it or their position would be given away. He slowly unzipped his backpack. Making as little movement and noise as possible. He pulled out the jar, undid the lid and dipped his hand into the sloppy oil. Once he had recoated himself he slowly handed the jar over to Geoff.

Another five minutes past and the grounders had dissipated on the hunt for more warm bodies. Jerome felt it safe enough to move again. They were off, without running and keeping to the same path as he had taken to find Geoff. They were closing in on the airport. Another few feet and they made it, slipping inside. Jerome closed the door. When he turned, Geoff grabbed his hand and shook it profusely thanking him.

"Don't thank me, thank your sister. If it wasn't for her I'd not have gone looking for you."

Geoff didn't say anymore. He started to rush to his sister and practically stumbled over the dead man and woman in the dim light. He gave a questioning look to Jerome. The scene became clearer to him once his eyes started to adjust. He could see the gapping hole in the floor and the busted down wall. *What had happened here?*

April heard the rush of footsteps and hid behind an area where the conveyer belt ended. Her heart raced and thudded in her ears while her hand grew slippery with sweat as she tightly gripped her gun. It wasn't until she heard Geoff's voice did she come out of hiding. She rushed up to embrace him just as he was taking in the rest of the scene.

After a moment she let go and turned her attention to Jerome. She threw her arms around him in a hug of sheer relief. Jerome was so surprised he was speechless. He'd not been shown any affection for the longest of times. It shocked him. A flush of warmth flowed through his body and for the first time in years he felt content.

April filled Geoff in on what happened with the man and woman that came looking for trouble.

"Jerome, I'm sorry, man. I had you pegged wrong. If I'd known, I'd never have hit you or treated you so poorly. I hope you can forgive me and allow us to tag along with you?"

"If this was my home, and that was my sister, I'd probably have done the same thing." He smiled for the first time in years. "So, let's not dwell on the past. Start fresh as my mamma always said. I guess you both can tag along. I dunno if you really want to, though. I'm not good with people. I have to admit, I consider myself damaged goods."

"We're all damaged," April said, as she fetched an extra plate and handed it to Jerome.

He was confused about receiving an empty plate.

"It is for when Geoff cooks up our meal. You did find food right, Geoff?"

"Yes, I did, but you aren't going to like it. It's more rabbit."

"Well, that's all we have had for almost four years now," she sighed heavily.

"So, what do you think the best move next is Jerome?"

"I say we head West toward Alaska. I'm hoping that those damn grounders can't survive in the cold climate. Besides it is the farthest place I can think of away from any nuclear plants. I just hope when they do

collapse that we are far enough away from the radiation for it to not affect us. I read once that the ocean air coming inland kept the air clear up there."

"You really know how to paint a grim picture don't you?" April said while untying her shoes and slipping out of them.

"I'm just being up front. One thing you'll soon find out about me, I don't sugar coat nothing."

"Speaking of coating, how did you learn about that oil trick?"

"It was an accident really. I'd been running from the creatures when I found a silo I thought might be filled with wood chips or something. I couldn't get the door open from the outside so I used the ladder to climb up and opened the hatch at the top. I dropped the hatch-ladder in. Unbeknownst to me, the damn thing was so brittle that I'd only stood on the first rang when it gave way and dropped me like a sack of potatoes. I fell right into the stuff. It explained why the door couldn't be opened from the outside. This stuff filled almost half of that damned silo. I managed to push the door open to escape and with the force of all that liquid I was shot out through the door in a raging torrent. I actually thought I was going to drown. I scrambled to my feet after having slipped several times, and those things went right past me. So I knew then that it would work."

"Good thing it did, or we might not have met you. That saved you and you saved my brother." April grinned.

It would be a long trip to Alaska. It would take almost a year. There would be danger along the way. Their lives would always be on the balance, but Jerome intended to get them safely there. They were his new family and he had a mission to accomplish.

The End

Can You Imagine

Can You Imagine

Can you imagine giving your kids a goodnight kiss, tucking them into bed, and then getting into a disagreement with your husband who ends up on the couch in the lounge because you can't stand the sight of each other? You go to bed, and while you are trying to find sleep through the bitter anger that festers inside of you, you hear a distant sound like thunder.

Your emotions are starting to rise, and a lone tear dribbles down your cheek and soaks into your pillowcase, somehow angering you more. You aren't sure if it is the tears or that you'd just wet your pillowcase. You hear another distant thunderous sound only to realize it has gotten closer.

Your mind is filled with questions about the argument you just had with your husband. And as another tear threatens to spill, you are jolted upright by an enormous explosion that feels far too real and way too close. You get on your knees on top of the bed and peer through the upper window and gasp. The sky flickers with bright orange and blue flashes, and you think to yourself, for just a moment, that it is New Years. The bright lights and booms resemble a massive fireworks display, until you see the fighter jets launching missiles without hesitation. Houses surrounding you shatter and disintegrate. Your eyes don't know what to look at. The noise is deafening, and the explosions are savage.

You jump off your bed and hurry directly to your children. They are already wide awake and terrified. You rush with them into the lounge to wake your husband who is in a deep sleep and snoring like an elephant. He finally jolts awake, and in his startled state he tries to speak but no words come out. You and the kids shout at him to get up and look outside. You pull open the curtains and demand he look.

With each explosive boom in the background, your panic is heightened. The whole house shakes like it is suffering the effects of an earthquake.

The children are crying and in their panic they repeat over and over, "What is it?"

Once your husband's mind catches up, he takes in everything beyond the open curtains and ushers everyone outside to hunker behind his car. *It seems to be the safest place to be*, he thinks.

The planes whoosh by at an alarming rate, rolling through the clouds like the ash off a volcano. Then a booming rumble. Around you is an

orchestra of bloodcurdling caterwauls.

With each new ear-piercing howl, you and the kids jump. Debris flies in all directions and particles from the blown-up houses hurtle toward you at rates you can't comprehend. The kids are bellowing, but their voices are lost among the other nearby shrieks.

People run in all directions. Some hold bleeding wounds, some are on fire, and others stumble around clutching their dead loved ones. Can you imagine one of your neighbors, a young mother, wandering around screaming that she is blind. Another, a teenage boy, races through the streets calling out for his dog. People further away can be heard shouting for help. Car horns, screeches and crashes are disabling you. You don't know where to look or who to help. Can you imagine holding tighter to your children because losing them is not an option.

Through the chaos that envelopes you, you steal a glance at your husband. You look directly into his light blue eyes and instantly forget about your earlier argument. His hand strokes the back of your hand in an attempt to comfort you while you both protect your children with your own bodies.

Tears automatically escape your panicked eyes as you gaze up to the sky, watching as the planes finally leave. The night sky is lit up with the hellish lights from the burning fires below. Without realizing it, you have been holding your breath. Drawing in a few gulps of air you start to cough. The dust and smoke feel like thick sand at the back of your throat.

Once you and your husband are sure all the planes have gone, you stand up and look around. The kids are pestering both of you for answers; answers you cannot give. Your heart feels broken while your mind fills with dread.

As you stare about, you see things that you wished you could un-see. Your body visibly rattles like a wind-blown leaf and unsteadily you pivot on your heels to take in the carnage. The house three down from yours is missing, and to the left and right of that spot are piles of burning rubble where once sat the dwellings of your neighbors.

Somehow the planes missed your house and the two next to you. Further up the street, you notice other homes that have not been destroyed, but those next to them are gone. At first, it seems to be a pattern, but soon you realize it is just dumb luck. Your mind rationalizes that the planes couldn't target every house and every street.

Your mind continues to think, wondering how far this has gone, when you are jolted back to reality by a screaming man who is on fire. You turn and notice your husband has started for the inside of the house and you quickly follow, shielding the children from the horror outside.

You watch him try to turn on the TV, but the power is out. You helplessly watch him grow angrier and curse in frustration of not owning a battery-operated radio. He leaves abruptly after telling you he is going to his car to try the radio.

You and the children wait at the entrance of the house. His face tells you all you need to know. You hug the children a little closer to you as more tears stream down your reddened cheeks. Sirens are screaming, people are hollering, dogs are barking, houses moan as the timbers crack, and people run for their lives.

He relays back to you what he's heard, and it is far worse than you could ever have imagined. The entire city and all suburbs have been attacked. No one knows why or by whom. It has not been explained.

He barks orders for everyone to get dressed into day clothes and shoes. You momentarily hover before fleeing to your room to dress. As you approach the front door, you see him and the kids waiting for you. It tears you apart to see the terror on your children's faces.

He gets you all into the car and says, 'We're going to your mothers.' You don't respond because of the fear over what you might find.

The short drive over is extended by the people clogging the streets as they try to escape.

Can you imagine driving toward your mother's house seeing the same devastation continue that you'd just left? Houses along the way are splintered and broken like wood tinder. Some are flat and stacked like decks of cards, and still others are ablaze, lighting the sky in an orange glow. The thick cloud of ash is almost unbearable as it stings your eyes and chokes your breath. You quickly roll the window back up and close your eyes, but even with your lids shut tight, you see the death and destruction. It haunts you like a waking nightmare.

Once on your mother's street, you realize her address is erased. He drives by slowly and you see no sign of life. A burning pile of destruction is all that remains.

Can you imagine shrinking into yourself and sighing? Can you imagine being in such shock that it is the only reaction you are capable of giving?

Your husband reaches for your hand, and gently squeezes it. His look of sorrow swallows you like a giant sinkhole.

He keeps moving and says, ‘We’re going to my mothers.’

The usual forty-minute drive is exacerbated by the congestion of other survivors clumping up the highway. You arrive two and a half hours later and see that his parents’ house is obliterated as well. There is no evidence of life.

Your husband cries out and pounds the steering wheel, causing you to jump in a start. You reassuringly squeeze his thigh and whisper, ‘What now?’

The End

Point of No Return

Point of No Return

My mouth and nostrils were filled with wet sand and my cheeks burned from the cuts caused by the raw sharpness of the seashells. I opened my eyes halfway, then I must've passed out again. When I woke, I looked out toward the ocean and saw a distant fire, smoke bellowing into the sky as if an offering to the gods. The cargo ship I had stowed away on was burning and sinking fast.

I got up, but instantly fell to my knees. My head was throbbing, and I soon realized I had a gash across my forehead above my right eye and another on my left shoulder. I checked myself for other injuries. Finding none, I gathered my wits as I rose more slowly this time.

I glanced around before taking my first step on the mushy, sandy shoreline. I instantly began to gag when I saw the first dead body. So many bodies had washed up on the beach that day. I called out, but no one answered. They were all dead... burned or drowned. I spent a week combing the island, yet found no one. I believed I was alone. I had found some berries and a freshwater stream. At least I had some sustenance until I could get off the island. I started a collection of wood and twine and had begun to make a raft. I had been hearing strange sounds, but couldn't place them. It dawned on me that there were no birds in the trees. No animals at all!

Come on Nathaniel you're going crazy like your uncle Sam. There has to be animals on this island! Something wasn't right, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I carried another pile of wood to my makeshift hut and dropped it. I was exhausted, so laid down for a nap and was startled awake by a constant prodding of sticks. My head, face, neck, back, and legs were all being poked by so many sticks. I opened my eyes and quickly closed them. *Don't be such a scaredy-cat,* I heard myself saying. I opened them again and shook my head as if to un-see what was surrounding me. *Jesus, were they humans?*

I caught a glimpse of the few that had turned around as if they were making room for something else. The back of their heads had faces too. Two-faced creatures leered at me, but it was what I saw and heard next that really scared the shit out of me. From the distance came the sound of heavy limbs being dragged across the forest floor. Whatever it was, it was enormous. It either dragged its feet or several feet through the undergrowth.

The ones standing in front of me would occasionally make a discordant cackling sound and acted fearful.

The forest sounded like it was being spread wide open with whatever was coming. I could hear leaves and bark being crushed, and trees splitting. I could feel my heartbeat in my throat as my body broke out into a sweat and gooseflesh pricked at me like glass shards. I literally fell backward when the creature came into sight. It was the ugliest sonofabitch I had ever seen. It had eight arms, four legs and two heads with mouths like shark jaws. I could see multiple rows of sharp teeth glistening in the daylight. It was drooling glutinous salvia so profusely that it swayed in strings that hung from its lips and spat out in odd directions as it moved. It wore no clothes and appeared to be of no identifying gender.

I had recently turned twenty-two, and regretted having run away from home. I didn't want to die like this. I shuffled across the ground as I backed up. Then I got onto my feet and took off. I ran toward the beach. Stupidly, I chanced a look over my shoulder and didn't see the hidden rock beneath the sand. I fell face first, but I didn't get a chance to turn and get up. I felt my ankles being pulled as I was violently flipped over onto my back. I looked up into the glowing yellow eyes of the beast.

A string of curses unraveled from my tongue, like feathers unfurling, as the creature advanced. I got a whiff of death, the kind of putrid smell that unleashes the acid into the back of your throat burning it like the devil shoved his pitchfork down your gullet.

I squirmed but it held me strong. I felt my ankles breaking and heard my bones snapping like turkey legs. I suddenly felt heat radiating up my legs and was compelled to see why. I instantly vomited at the sight of my own flesh being torn from my legs. I wanted it to be over. I was being skinned alive. I had nowhere to go and wished that the very beach I washed ashore upon would open up and swallow me. I cursed at the monster again and again. My throat became so hoarse I could scream no more.

I felt great pressure across my arms as it held them outstretched. Using another set of its arms, the monster began to pull. My flesh grew taunt until, like a frayed garment, they popped as they were ripped from the sockets. My panicked eyes darted everywhere as I threw up rancid bile at the sight of the other creatures gnawing on my arms and the skin from my legs. I felt a claw drag across my chest as the beast tore me wide open. My organs were now on display, like stew in a bowl, for the beast to feast upon.

It was the end of me.
The End

A very special mention

Two of the stories in this anthology are starring two real life people that volunteered themselves to be a part of this anthology.

Jasmine B. Starring in **Trick Or Treat** and **Derrick Anthony Marrow.** Starring in **Junkyard.**

All about Jasmine.

Jasmine was born and raised in small-town Pennsylvania. A shy kid growing up, she turned to books, preferring to live in the fantasy worlds inside her head rather than reality. She got into horror early on, beginning with Goosebumps and easing her way up to the big timers like Stephen King, Richard Laymon, and Jack Ketchum. She also discovered cheesy 80s horror movies in the early 90s at the tender age of six, and has been a fan of the genre ever since.

When she's not reading or spending time with her family (including her cuddly cat named Mistress Stormageddon, Dark Lord(ess) of All), Jasmine enjoys geeking out over nerdy shows like Doctor Who and Game of Thrones, listening to music from the 50s-80s, playing board games with friends, and posting silly quiz results online.

http://bookreviewsbyjasmine.blogspot.com/

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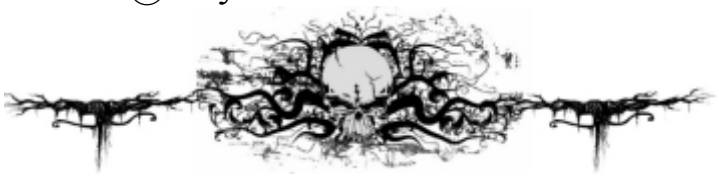

All about Derrick.

Derrick is a multi-genre author born and raised in Philadelphia.

His forte no matter the genre is storytelling. He creates great stories with vivid pictures, movies with words is the way he likes to think about his books. Currently he has three books published with a fourth coming soon and at least three others, two sequels and a new series in various points of development.

Currently there is a middle grade fiction novel with sci-fi elements. A great story your children (and you) will love set in a non-dystopian future. Then there is a book of poetry dealing with the realities of love and life. And a Young Adult/Supernatural/Fantasy Novel. Links to all his published books can be found in the Book Link above.

Derrick is a family man, a professional, and a coach (football, basketball, baseball). He is personally active on his social media accounts. Feel free to reach out, he is just a normal guy.

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/Authordanthonym

Twitter @D_Anthony_M

Other books by Ellie Douglas

Hounded

Hounded 2

Toxic Desire

The Dead Undone

The Dead Wake Anthology

Fear Inducer

About the Author

Ellie Douglas is a Kiwi writer who currently resides in New Zealand with her husband and four children. As a child, Enid Blyton and Stephen King inspired her love of writing and reading. When she is not writing, she can be found designing one-of- a-kind pre-made book covers. Her passions of creative art, led her to becoming a *talented sought-after* freelance cover artist. In her free time she enjoys the cinema, spending time with her children, music and dancing, and anything and everything to do with Horror, especially zombies.

Feel free to explore her social media sites.

http://www.authorellie.com/

https://twitter.com/AuthorEllie

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Thank you for reading the 'Death O Death.' Gaining exposure as an independent author relies mostly on word-of-mouth, so if you have the time and inclination, please consider leaving a review wherever you can. Thank you :)

Feel free to email me author1ellie@gmail.com with any questions you may have about this book, or anything at all. I will always reply.

Best wishes.

Ellie Douglas